

# YARRA HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY

SUPPORTING PEOPLE  
EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS  
AND PURSUING PATHWAYS TO HOUSING

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Yarra City Council acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people as the Traditional Owners and true sovereigns of the land now known as Yarra. We also acknowledge the significant contributions made by other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to life in Yarra. We pay our respects to Elders from all nations and to their Elders past, present and future.

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# MAYOR'S MESSAGE

## NO PERSON SHOULD BE WITHOUT A HOME.

Access to housing is a universal human right and an essential base from which people build their lives.

The current global COVID-19 pandemic has shone a spotlight on an already unacceptable situation. This pandemic has highlighted the susceptibility of people living in overcrowded housing, in rooming houses and particularly of those sleeping rough, who aren't able to isolate safely in their home when this becomes a requirement. The long-term consequences of the pandemic and resulting economic recession are yet to become fully clear however it is certain that many people, who were already living precariously, will now be at risk of homelessness. However, the public health response has also shown us that accommodation can be found for homeless people, albeit temporarily at this stage, when there is the political will to do so.

We must act urgently to improve the outcomes for people experiencing homelessness now. There needs to be considerable investment to increase the availability of public, social and affordable housing, and the provision of the necessary supports to people with additional and complex needs.

Council will do its part to support our residents

who need housing solutions. Through this Strategy we will build on the work that we are already doing to deliver a coordinated and compassionate crisis response to those who are sleeping rough, provide targeted case management and early intervention for people at risk of homelessness, and work toward the ultimate goal of prevention by supporting an increase in public, social and affordable housing and appropriate support services.

We will build our response around people and the particular situation in our local community. Only by working closely with service providers, our neighbouring councils and other levels of government and advocating strongly for the rights of all our citizens to a home, can we begin to address this whole of society problem.

**Councillor Misha Coleman**  
**Mayor, Yarra City Council**



# COUNCIL'S VISION AND COMMITMENT

All levels of government should design and implement policies, laws and strategies to prevent and remedy homelessness. Failure to do so reflects that homelessness has neither been recognised nor addressed as a violation of human rights. What is lacking at all levels is a shared commitment to ensuring enjoyment of the right to adequate housing — and related rights such as life and health.

– Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context, United Nations General Assembly, 30 December 2015<sup>1</sup>

Yarra City Council is strongly committed to improving outcomes for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in our municipality and working to prevent homelessness in all its forms.

We recognise that access to an affordable, accessible, long-term home, where you can safely be yourself, is not only a basic requirement for all people, but an essential human right.<sup>2</sup> It is also integral to an inclusive, dynamic and sustainable city. Homelessness affects the entire community, and it requires a compassionate, whole-of-community response.

This strategy enables Council to improve the way we respond to and address the complexities of homelessness. Through this strategy, we aim to find practical ways to ensure that our city is a kind and welcoming place. By understanding the drivers and impacts of homelessness, and working together to address them, we can create real change.

Council believes that it is important to keep people at the centre of programs and policies and uphold a human-rights-based approach that puts wellbeing first. In recent years we have seen an increasing number of people homeless in our municipality and we need to take action to support our vulnerable communities.

This is why we have created this Homelessness Strategy. It lays the foundation for us to work towards preventing homelessness in our city, and provides direction for addressing the impacts of homelessness through crisis response and early intervention. We will advocate to, and work across, all levels of government, foster partnerships with peers and service providers, and educate and support our community to realise the best outcomes.

<sup>1</sup>The Foundation Abbé Pierre and FEANTSA, 2018, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup>Sidotj, 1996.





# INTRODUCTION

## Homelessness in Yarra

Having a home is essential not only to surviving, but because it enables people to engage in life and society with dignity and to maintain their health and wellbeing. It is a fundamental human right upon which many others rest.<sup>3</sup> Across the Yarra City Council (Council), we work with people experiencing various forms and stages of homelessness, including people sleeping rough, families and young people in overcrowded or inappropriate housing, people living in our local rooming houses and women and children escaping family violence. We collaborate with community service providers and neighbouring councils and strive to educate our community about the key issues.

Homelessness has increased markedly in Victoria in the last decade, with the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) noting in the 2016 Census that there was a 43 percent increase in the number of Victorians experiencing homelessness between 2006 and 2016. Homelessness is often higher in the inner city, and Yarra has the fourth highest rate of homelessness of all municipalities in Victoria, more than double that of the state average.<sup>4</sup> At the last Census, it was estimated that there were 838 homeless people in Yarra, including 64 people experiencing primary homelessness (i.e. living in tents, improvised dwellings, or sleeping out), and 170 people who were marginally housed (i.e. in minimum standard accommodation, such as caravans or overcrowded dwellings).<sup>5</sup>

In 2018–2019, 1,228 people accessed specialist homelessness services in Yarra, of whom 621 were female and 607 male.<sup>6</sup> Most homeless or marginally housed people in Yarra are relatively young and about 160 children have been recorded in recent Census estimates and specialist homelessness services client data for Yarra.

<sup>3</sup>Sidoti, 1996, p.1.

<sup>4</sup>Estimating Homelessness, 2016.

<sup>5</sup>Estimating Homelessness, 2016.

<sup>6</sup>AIHW, Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2018–19, 2019.

Additionally, over the past year the number of referrals that Yarra has received to assist people who are sleeping rough on our streets and in our parks has doubled, increasing from 66 in 2018 to 122 in 2019.

It is important to note that, although the data gives us some indication of the extent of the problem, it is likely that the real numbers are far greater. The numbers can also hide the diversity of experiences and complexity of people's circumstances.

### Defining Homelessness

Homelessness takes a range of forms. Some people may have become suddenly homeless and require crisis accommodation, while others may be sleeping rough in public places over a long period of time or 'couch surfing' between friends, family and acquaintances. While the stereotype of the homeless person is often a person sleeping rough on the streets, people sleeping out like this account for only seven percent of Australia's homeless population overall.<sup>7</sup>

### THE LARGEST HOMELESS GROUP IN YARRA IS PERSONS LIVING IN BOARDING HOUSES.<sup>8</sup>

As a lived experience, homelessness is shaped by multiple social factors (such as alcohol or drug dependency, mental health concerns, intergenerational trauma, family violence), as well as structural and economic factors (such as poverty, disconnection from the labour market, a lack of housing for low income households). When people are homeless, they often become distanced from family, friends and the community and lose social connection and control over their environment.

### Council's role

Ensuring we have a coordinated and holistic approach is key to effectively addressing the complexities and diversity of homelessness and enables Council to focus on the needs of the individuals who experience it. This strategy provides a way to unify Council's efforts across the organisation and to consider further initiatives to prevent and respond to homelessness in our community.

By responding to the issue of homelessness at the point of crisis and advocating and working towards early intervention, and ultimately prevention, we are committed to improving outcomes for people who are homeless in our city. We seek to ensure that Yarra is a welcoming place for everyone, where the response to our most vulnerable citizens is one of compassion and with respect for human rights.

Yarra's strong commitment to social justice is supported by our community,<sup>9</sup> with recent research into visible homelessness in the municipality showing that our community is both understanding and sympathetic to the complex circumstances that can result in homelessness.<sup>10</sup> Where concerns arise and intolerance may take hold is when primary homelessness is compounded by and conflated with other issues that may be present at a rough sleeping site, such as alcohol and drug use and complex behaviours, such as violence or shouting, or toileting in public spaces.<sup>11</sup> It is these situations that are most complicated, and Council must address circumstances thoughtfully, respectfully and with consideration of the need to balance human rights with health and safety for the entire community.

<sup>7</sup>Thorpe and Babilie, 2019, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup>'Estimating Homelessness, 2016'.

<sup>9</sup>Metropolis Research, 2020, p. 29.

<sup>10</sup>Young and Petty, 2017, p. 3.

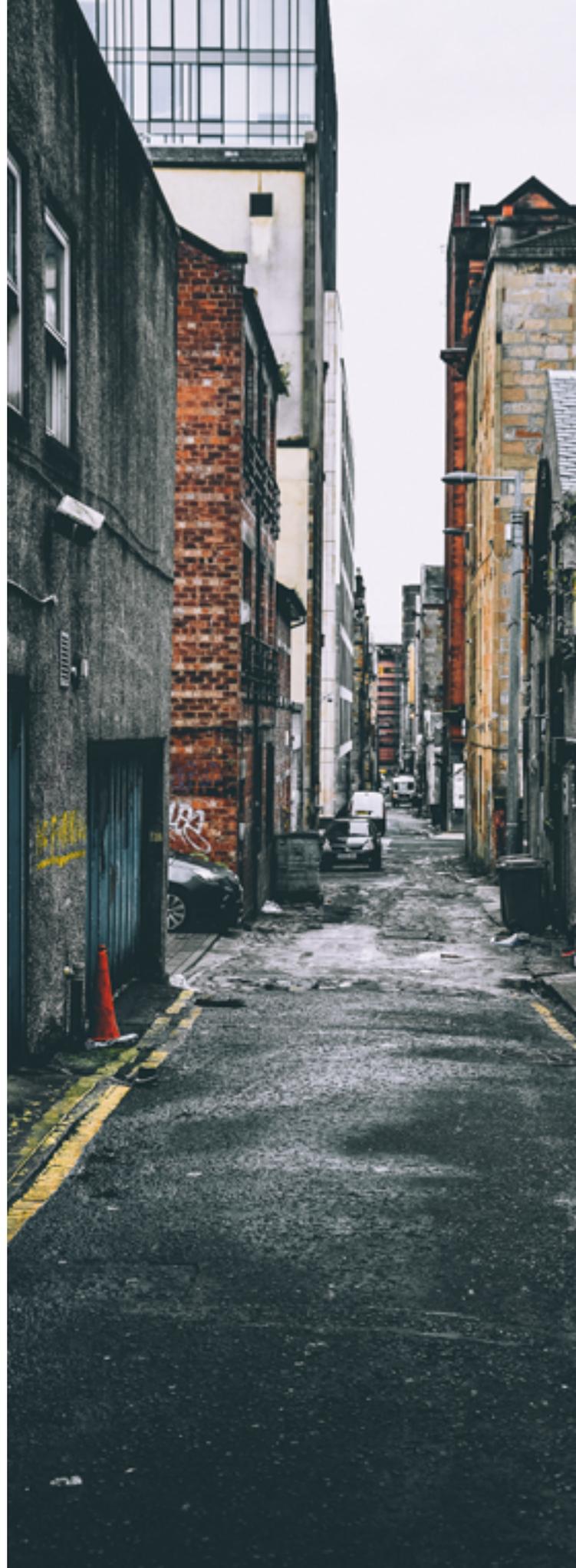
<sup>11</sup>Young and Petty, 2017, p. 4.

Municipal councils are the tier of government closest to the people. There is an important role for local government to play in addressing homelessness through education, advocacy and coordinating effective strategies in partnership with service providers to address homelessness at each point of the spectrum: crisis, early intervention and prevention. Through programs and services, Council works to address homelessness at each of these critical points.

Our Community Wellbeing programs provide material aid, such as food, and help people in our community connect with essential support services to address their individual health and housing needs. We also contribute funds towards referrals to local homelessness services so that they can reach out to people who are sleeping rough. When needed, we address safety and hygiene issues in our public spaces. Council policies and local laws govern many of our public spaces and buildings, such as parks, sporting grounds, footpaths and libraries, all of which are places commonly occupied by a diverse range of community members, including by those who are experiencing primary homelessness (sleeping rough).

### Review and reporting

The Strategic Directions outlined below will be implemented and monitored through an implementation plan and the Strategy will be reviewed and updated as needed. Annual reports will be provided to Council on the progress and status of the strategy and any relevant shifts in the policy environment. At the point of major change to Council's policy positions or the broader policy environment, a new Strategy will be developed.







# RESEARCH

## Recognising causes and understanding vulnerability

People who are homeless are not a distinct and separate population. The line between being homeless and not being homeless can be fluid and the pathways into and out of homelessness are neither linear nor uniform. Individuals and families who end up homeless may not share much in common with each other, aside from the fact that they are extremely vulnerable, and lack adequate housing and income and the necessary supports to ensure they stay housed. Homelessness is not just about a lack of housing, but also about severe marginalisation, disadvantage, and discrimination.

## Structural conditions and individual risk factors

The causes of homelessness reflect a complex interplay between *structural factors, systemic failures and individual circumstances*.<sup>12</sup> In current literature, homelessness is generally understood to be caused by a combination of adverse structural conditions (such as unfavourable housing and labour markets) and individual risk factors (such as alcohol and substance use, physical and mental health problems and experiences of domestic violence). Experiences of homelessness are also likely to add to and compound any pre-existing issues.

AT AN INDIVIDUAL LEVEL, HOMELESSNESS CAN BE BOTH THE RESULT OF COMPLEX ISSUES AND THE CAUSE OF THEM.

A 2016 AHURI research report statistically examined entries and exits from homelessness and found that at an individual level, men are more likely than women to enter homelessness,

<sup>12</sup> Homeless Hub, 2017.

those with low levels of schooling are more likely to become homeless, as are those who engage in risky behaviours (such as regular drug use), and previous experience of homelessness increases an individual's risk for further periods of homelessness.

At a structural level the research finds that a rise in median market rents increases the risk of entry into homelessness, as does a rise in unemployment rates, something that has leapt up as a result of the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>13</sup> However housing and labour market inequities and changes tend to impact those with complex and high needs less.

### Being at risk

It is estimated that more than half (57 percent) of lower income rental households in the private market experience rental stress (paying more than 30 percent of their gross income on housing costs),<sup>14</sup> and around 1 in 6 women (1.6 million) have experienced some form of partner violence since the age of 15, putting them at risk of homelessness.<sup>15</sup>

### MANY AUSTRALIANS EXPERIENCE EVENTS AT SOME POINT IN THEIR LIVES THAT MAY PLACE THEM AT GREATER RISK OF HOMELESSNESS.

For someone under housing stress, losing their job due to illness or retrenchment could create a critical situation in which they become homeless. Someone experiencing domestic violence may have no safety net or resources, or will sacrifice what they do have in order to escape a dire situation.

These situations begin to reveal how some people are particularly at risk of homelessness due to circumstances beyond their control.

The restrictions and economic impact resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic will have added an additional layer of hardship to the circumstances of many people who are already vulnerable for other reasons.

### Vulnerable groups

Although homelessness can affect a diverse group of people, some groups are over-represented in homelessness statistics or particularly vulnerable due to lack of government supports, structural inequalities, inadequate institutional transitions and/or personal risk factors. A number of groups have been identified as national priority cohorts in the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA):<sup>16</sup>

- women and children affected by family and domestic violence,
- children and young people,
- Indigenous Australians,
- people experiencing repeat homelessness,
- people exiting institutions and care into homelessness, and
- older people.<sup>17</sup>

While the Victorian NHHA does not specifically include people with disability as a priority cohort, Council recognises that many people who are homeless or at risk may also have a disability, and that this can be an important contributing factor to their vulnerability and circumstances. It is important to understand who our homeless populations are, and what risk factors are associated with experiences of homelessness, in order to tailor responses and supports, as well as working on prevention. Many people who are experiencing homelessness fit into a number of these identified categories, compounding their vulnerability.

<sup>13</sup>Coates, 2020, p.19.

<sup>14</sup>4130.0 - Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019.

<sup>15</sup>4906.0 - Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017

<sup>16</sup>National Housing and Homelessness Agreement, 2018.

<sup>17</sup>National Housing and Homelessness Agreement, 2018, Schedule B, item B2, p. 17.

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Eighteen percent (almost 11,000) of Aboriginal people in Victoria, were in contact with homelessness services in 2017–18, as compared to 1.8 percent of Victorians.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, 10.4 percent of homelessness clients in Victoria are Aboriginal yet they only make up 0.9 percent of the population.<sup>19</sup>

**Housing outcomes for Aboriginal people are a significant part of the enduring legacy of an extensive colonisation process characterised by waves of dispossession. Aboriginal people have been homeless in their own nation for over 200 years. In no other portfolio is the moral imperative to restore rights more compelling for Victoria's First Australians than in housing.**<sup>20</sup>

The Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework, released by Aboriginal Housing Victoria in 2020, articulates and evidences the current crisis in Aboriginal homelessness and calls for equitable housing outcomes through 'The development of a highly capable, culturally fit Aboriginal housing and homelessness sector' that shifts the norm of Aboriginal housing from one of marginal housing and homelessness to home ownership.<sup>21</sup>

**THE OVER-REPRESENTATION OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE IN HOMELESSNESS DATA IS PARTICULARLY STARK AND A MATTER THAT NEEDS TO BE ADDRESSED URGENTLY BY ALL LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT.**

<sup>18</sup>Productivity Commission 2019, Table 19A.4.

<sup>19</sup>Productivity Commission, 2019.

<sup>20</sup>Aboriginal Housing Victoria, 2020, p.21.

<sup>21</sup>Aboriginal Housing Victoria, 2020.

## 'ABBY'

**ABBY IS AN ABORIGINAL MALE AGED 50 YEARS OLD WITH STRONG FAMILY CONNECTIONS IN FITZROY. HE FIRST CONNECTED TO HIS FAMILY WHEN ATTENDING A FUNERAL IN DAREBIN. THROUGH WORD OF MOUTH HE FOUND OUT THAT FITZROY WAS THE PLACE WHERE KOORI COMMUNITY COULD MEET UP AND GATHER IN A CULTURALLY SAFE PLACE.**

Before Abby became homeless, he was living in Richmond. In 1984 he was diagnosed with HIV and feels that he 'was one of the lucky ones', because although he watched most of his peers and friends succumb to AIDS, he managed to keep living.

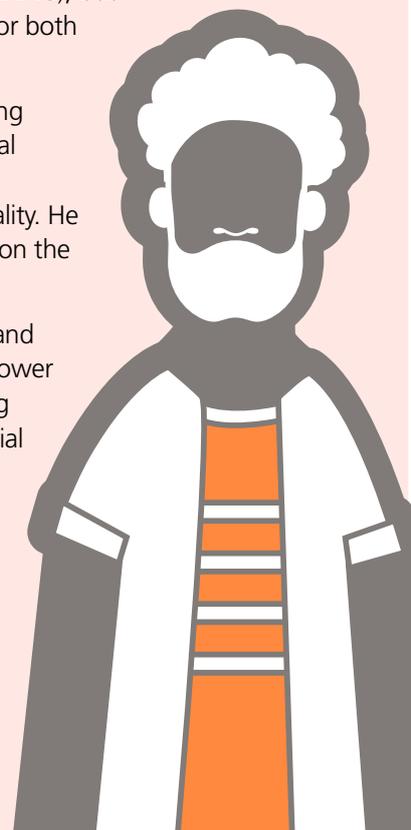
Abby had to move to country Victoria. He settled there for a while, and had many animals and a large vegetable garden. Eventually though, Abby's health started to fail and he was hospitalised more of the time, so staying in the bush become impossible. He had to move closer to the services he badly needed.

On returning to Melbourne, Abby lived out of his car and couch surfed. It was hard. He registered for housing with the Department of Human Services and Aids Housing Action Group (AHAG), but there was a long waiting list for both agencies.

Abby tried staying in a boarding house but some of his personal items were stolen and he was assaulted because of his sexuality. He decided he would rather stay on the street.

A property became available and Abby moved into a high rise tower on an inner-city public housing estate, which was near essential support services. He later named this place 'the tower of doom'.

Finally, after more than ten years, Abby has moved into a permanent home where he can have pets and a garden.



## Family and Domestic Violence

Family and domestic violence is a critical issue and the number one cause for seeking homelessness assistance in Victoria, alongside financial difficulties (44 percent of people seeking assistance).<sup>22</sup> Across Australia, people seeking homelessness assistance due to family and domestic violence were more likely to be women (90 percent of all adult clients who experienced family and domestic violence) and half of all clients aged under 18 years had experienced family and domestic violence.<sup>23</sup>

While domestic and family violence is not limited to one group, culture, gender, or sexuality, overwhelmingly it is violence perpetrated by men against women and it is women and children who are at greatest risk of homelessness as a consequence.<sup>24</sup>

Importantly, experiencing family violence as a child leads to greater likelihood of adult experiences of both violence and homelessness<sup>25</sup> so prevention and provision of safe housing for families is key to further intergenerational inequity and damage. Mission Australia have called for an expansion of safe at home programs and rapid rehousing options to support people out of domestic and family violence whilst avoiding homelessness, but ultimately point to the prevention of violence in the first instance as a key to reducing homelessness in Australia.<sup>26</sup>

## 'LEILA'

**LEILA IS 17 YEARS OLD AND HOMELESS. SHE WAS FORCED FROM HER HOME AFTER AN EXPERIENCE OF FAMILY VIOLENCE, AND HER RELATIONSHIP WITH HER MOTHER HAS BROKEN DOWN, LEAVING HER WITHOUT ACCESS TO CLOTHING, PERSONAL ITEMS, AND CRUCIALLY, IDENTIFICATION DOCUMENTS.**

Leila began couch-surfing at friends' houses as a result of her situation, and her school soon had concerns for both her housing situation and poor school attendance. Through the school, Leila was connected to Yarra's Youth Services for support.

She was assisted into emergency accommodation at Front Yard and later accepted into a youth refuge. During this period she also attended court in relation to family violence. Her mental and physical health was notably affected during this time.

Leila has had issues accessing Centrelink supports due to a lack of identification and also struggles to engage with support services and attend appointments, leading to a missed opportunity for longer-term housing and a return to couch-surfing. In recent months she has experienced peer related violence, had items stolen, and been fined for breaching COVID-19 restrictions.

After being forced to leave her friends' homes, she returned to Front Yard and was accepted into another refuge where she is now living.



<sup>22</sup>AIHW, 2019, Specialist Homelessness Services Collection data cubes.

<sup>23</sup>AIHW, 2019, Specialist Homelessness Services Collection data cubes.

<sup>24</sup>DiNicola, Liyanarachchi, and Plummer, 2020.

<sup>25</sup>DiNicola, Liyanarachchi, and Plummer, 2020.

<sup>26</sup>DiNicola, Liyanarachchi, and Plummer, 2020.

## Children and young people

Across Victoria, 12 percent of those accessing specialist homelessness services in 2018–19, were young people presenting alone (65 percent of whom were female). Another three percent were children with a care and protection order.<sup>27</sup> Known drivers of homelessness include family conflict and domestic violence, and poor youth incomes and welfare benefits leave young people with little safety net when leaving a family home due to conflict or danger. Young people leaving out-of-home care are also known to be particularly vulnerable to experiencing homelessness, as are young LGBTIQ people. Engagement in education, training and pathways to employment are seen as particularly important for young people who have experienced homelessness or who are at risk.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup>AIHW, 2020, Specialist homelessness services 2018–19 – Data tables.

<sup>28</sup>MacKenzie, et al., 2020.

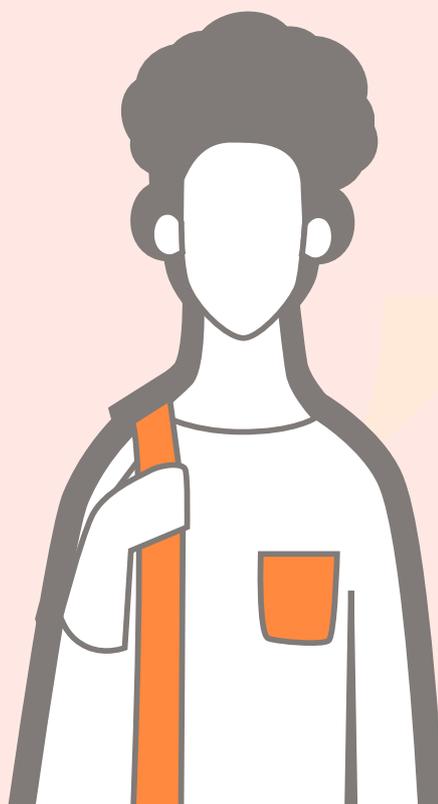
## 'AJ'

### AJ IS 17 YEARS OLD. HE MIGRATED TO AUSTRALIA AS A REFUGEE WHEN HE WAS 12.

A year and a half ago, AJ was expelled from high school and shortly after committed his first criminal offence. This led to significant family conflict and ultimately resulted in him leaving his family home and becoming homeless.

AJ was initially supported into crisis accommodation through a youth housing service but was soon admitted into a psychiatric ward and diagnosed with psychosis. Due to his history of offending and his mental health issues, it has been challenging to find housing with the right supports for his needs. He remains on an involuntary treatment order and has been cycling in and out of various accommodation options and forms of homelessness, including periods of sleeping rough.

Thankfully AJ was recently provided longer-term housing at a youth refuge, where a team of service providers are working with him to secure long-term supported housing.



## Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans Intersex Queer or Questioning (LGBTIQ+)

There is a lack of research on LGBTIQ+ people and homelessness, and much of the homelessness data that is collected does not record gender identity beyond binary terms. The research that does exist however suggests that they are a vulnerable group due to both the complexity of their experiences and difficulty accessing services.<sup>29</sup>

Lesbian, gay and bisexual people were at least twice as likely as heterosexuals to experience homelessness based on the 2014 ABS General Social Survey. While the survey did not record gender diversity or intersex status, the *LGBTQ Homelessness Research Project* found a large increase in trans and gender diverse clients in recent years, as reported by homelessness services.<sup>30</sup> The research project also found that the vulnerability of LGBTIQ+ people to homelessness was often directly related to experiences of structural inequalities (arising from homophobia, biphobia and/or transphobia, and heteronormativity) as well as personal trauma (including family conflict and childhood experiences of sexual assault). Further challenges with homelessness services and housing were often experienced due to ignorance of LGBTIQ+ identities and poor understanding of non-binary identities, which can lead to misgendering or placement at inappropriate, and potentially dangerous, sites.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup>Mission Australia, 2015.

<sup>30</sup>McNair et al., 2017.

<sup>31</sup>McNair et al., 2017.

## 'SAM'

**SAM IDENTIFIES AS BEING OF NON-BINARY GENDER AND HAS A PSYCHOSOCIAL DISABILITY THAT IS MADE WORSE BY THEIR HOUSING ARRANGEMENTS, WHICH THEY FIND UPSETTING AND WHICH MAKE THEM FEEL UNSAFE.**

Because Sam presents as a woman, they have been living in supported women's accommodation, but Sam identifies more as a man. It's very upsetting for them to have to share space closely with cis-gendered women (who identify with the gender assigned to them at birth).

Sam doesn't feel able to be themselves in their home. In addition to impacting on Sam's human rights, this situation worsens the effects of Sam's disability, taking a significant toll on their mental health.

Support services are trying to find shared-gender accommodation for Sam that is affordable on a Disability Support Pension. While it looks like this may be possible, there is no guarantee that the shared accommodation will provide Sam with the safe space they need, as this is dependent on who else is living at the shared property.



## People exiting prison

Release from prison is also known to be a high risk factor for homelessness. In 2018–19, almost 5,000 Victorian homelessness clients were identified as exiting from a custodial facility. The rate of clients exiting custodial arrangements per 10,000 increased significantly, from 5.8 percent in 2017–18 to 7.5 percent in 2018–19.<sup>32</sup> The vast majority of these clients were male (over 80 percent in Victoria in 2018–19).<sup>33</sup>

Notably, at a national level, seven in ten clients exiting custody were returning specialist homelessness services clients. Research referenced by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare suggests that housing and employment are crucial for re-entry into the community and also reduces the likelihood of re-offending. The research notes that 'prison discharges who experience homelessness [were] almost twice as likely to return to prison within nine months of release.'<sup>34</sup> Research by Justice Connect notes that 60 percent of their clients from Port Phillip Prison had been homeless at the time of their admission.<sup>35</sup> Justice Connect believes that support to maintain tenancies and address high levels of debt, which compound while someone is incarcerated, would be the most effective ways to reduce homelessness amongst people exiting prison, and have a flow on effect of reducing the rate of recidivism and overall per-person service cost.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup>AIHW, Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2018–19.

<sup>33</sup>AIHW, Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2018–19.

<sup>34</sup>AIHW, Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2018–19.

<sup>35</sup>Adams and Sowerwine, 2016.

<sup>36</sup>Adams and Sowerwine, 2016.



## Older people

More than 11,000 homelessness clients in Victoria are classified as older (55 years and above), constituting ten percent of clients in Victoria in 2018–19.<sup>37</sup> Use of homelessness services by older Australians is increasing across the country, with the number of clients up by 36 percent between 2014–15 and 2018–19.<sup>38</sup>

Notably, women over 55 years are the fastest growing cohort of people experiencing homelessness in Australia.<sup>39</sup> Throughout their lives women take on more carer duties for their children, family and friends and are more likely to spend periods working either part time or not at all to accommodate these extra responsibilities.

This diminishes their capacity for earning a wage and accumulating superannuation and other assets and can mean they have a greater reliance on a spouse or partner as the household breadwinner. Frequently this results in women having an insecure financial position with less savings and no buffer if circumstances change, something that inevitably happens as they get older if not before.

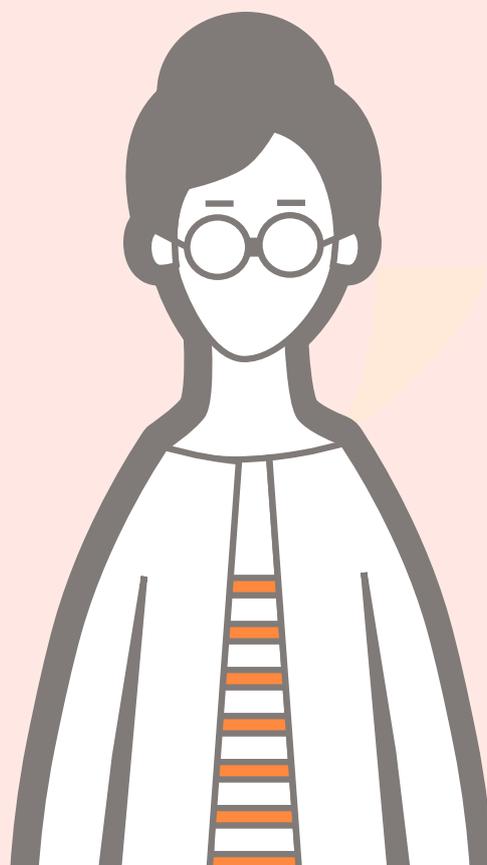
Older people face some of the same risks of homelessness as the rest of the population including lack of appropriate and affordable housing and lack of financial stability. However, these broad structural factors can impact on older people in different ways, due to changing housing needs and changing financial circumstances in the later stages of their lives. Other precursors to homelessness are experienced more frequently in older age, such as disability and mental illness.<sup>40</sup>

## 'HELEN'

### HELEN IS A 69-YEAR-OLD WOMAN WITH ALCOHOL ADDICTION PROBLEMS WHO LIVES IN PUBLIC HOUSING IN YARRA.

She is able to attend to most of her daily living activities independently but struggles to maintain her home and health. Helen is prone to hoarding and also has complex health needs with a history of cancer, open-heart surgery, depression and anxiety. She sees an alcohol and drug counsellor on a regular basis, who has initiated further referrals out of concern for Helen's health and her ability to look after herself and her home, and potentially to keep her tenancy.

As a result of these referrals Helen is now being supported through a home-care package that will assist with her health and housing risk. Her support worker has suggested she receives specialised support services to assist with hoarding and de-cluttering, and a dietician to support her health needs.



<sup>37</sup>AIHW, Specialist homelessness services 2018–19 – Data tables.

<sup>38</sup>AIHW, Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2018–19, 'Client Groups of Interest'.

<sup>39</sup>Estimating Homelessness, 2016'.

<sup>40</sup>Mission Australia, 2017.

Older people are more likely than the broader community to present to homelessness services when 'at risk' of homelessness (rather than when homeless), and anecdotal evidence from Yarra's Aged and Disability Services staff suggests that many of their clients have issues related to housing insecurity, stress and unfit living conditions (due to hoarding and so forth), but are not necessarily homeless. Worryingly however, for those who slip into homelessness chances of exit reduce markedly with age.<sup>41</sup>

### Mental health issues

The links between mental health issues and homelessness are also well established and people with mental health issues are known to be vulnerable to homelessness.<sup>42</sup>

### THE INTERACTION BETWEEN MENTAL HEALTH AND HOMELESSNESS IS COMPLICATED AND HAS IMPACTS IN BOTH DIRECTIONS.

Having mental health issues can be a contributing circumstance to homelessness, while the experience of homelessness (or the risk of homelessness) can also compound existing mental health issues and trigger new ones.<sup>43</sup> Despite these apparent connections mental health and homelessness services are separate policy platforms without any intersection.<sup>44</sup>

This creates detrimental service gaps in both mental health and homelessness and creates systemic barriers for people to access appropriate support and secure housing.<sup>45</sup>

Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) notes that the lack of appropriate housing and support for people who have mental health issues exacerbates existing systemic issues. Further, referrals to homelessness services from mental health specialists increased by 46 percent between 2014 and 2019, while the number of people discharged from psychiatric facilities into homelessness over the same period has increased by 49 percent.<sup>46</sup> Close to one in three Victorians accessing homelessness services had a current mental health issue in 2018–19, and nationally this is one of the fastest growing homelessness client groups.<sup>47</sup> People living with mental illness frequently have inappropriate health and social support, and reduced access to employment, which leads directly and quickly to poverty and unstable housing.<sup>48</sup>

### Drug and alcohol use

There is also a strong association between drug and alcohol use and homelessness, with studies from the homelessness services sector showing that 43 percent of the homeless population in Melbourne reported that they had alcohol and other drug use problems. Of these people, one third reported having substance abuse issues prior to becoming homeless.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>41</sup>Johnson et al., 2015.

<sup>42</sup>AIHW, Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2018–19, 'Client Groups of Interest'.

<sup>43</sup>Brackertz, et al, 2019.

<sup>44</sup>Brackertz, et al, 2019, p.9.

<sup>45</sup>Brackertz, et al, 2019, p.22.

<sup>46</sup>Productivity Commission, 2019, p. 5.

<sup>47</sup>Productivity Commission, 2019 p. 5.

<sup>48</sup>Jenny Smith, 2018.

<sup>49</sup>AIHW, 'Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs in Australia'.

## Refugees and asylum seekers

Refugees and asylum seekers in Australia are also vulnerable to homelessness due to exclusions from many social benefits, difficulties securing employment and discrimination in the housing market. Recent restrictions as to who is eligible to receive government support while awaiting processing of their immigration application has put thousands of vulnerable people at increased risk of homelessness. These tightened criteria has resulted in fewer people receiving any kind of payment and the increased reliance on community and charitable organisations to provide basic supports – in particular, housing. Organisations such as the Red Cross and the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre reported a vast increase in demand for housing services since the new rules came into effect and have been struggling to meet the demand,<sup>50</sup> while homelessness organisations anecdotally report an increase in self referrals from people without Australian citizenship who are homeless. While some of these people could apply for and potentially receive citizenship, the bureaucratic requirements to do so are onerous and make it difficult to facilitate and sustain the level of engagement required to submit and process a citizenship application.

Furthermore, the exclusion of asylum seekers from JobSeeker and JobKeeper payments, as well as Medicare, during the COVID-19 pandemic has increased their vulnerability and risk of homelessness with many more now reliant on support from the not-for-profit sector.<sup>51</sup>

## 'ALMA' AND 'IBRAHIM'

**ALMA AND IBRAHIM BOTH MIGRATED TO AUSTRALIA FROM AFRICAN COUNTRIES AND THEY NOW HAVE TWO YOUNG CHILDREN. DESPITE BOTH BEING EDUCATED AND HAVING WORK EXPERIENCE THEY HAVE STRUGGLED TO FIND EMPLOYMENT AND SECURE AN ADEQUATE INCOME IN AUSTRALIA.**

The family rented from a friend at a reduced rate for 12 months but when that arrangement finished they ended up living in the lounge room of other friends for a further eight months whilst waiting for social housing. During this time of uncertainty and instability Alma's mental health was very poor and she had suicidal thoughts.

The main barrier to accessing housing for this family was a lack of affordable options combined with unemployment for Alma and low-wage employment for Ibrahim. When they were finally housed securely, their lives became more stable and Alma's mental health improved.



<sup>50</sup>Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, 2019.

<sup>51</sup>See for instance Clayton and Hancock, 2020.

## Homelessness data

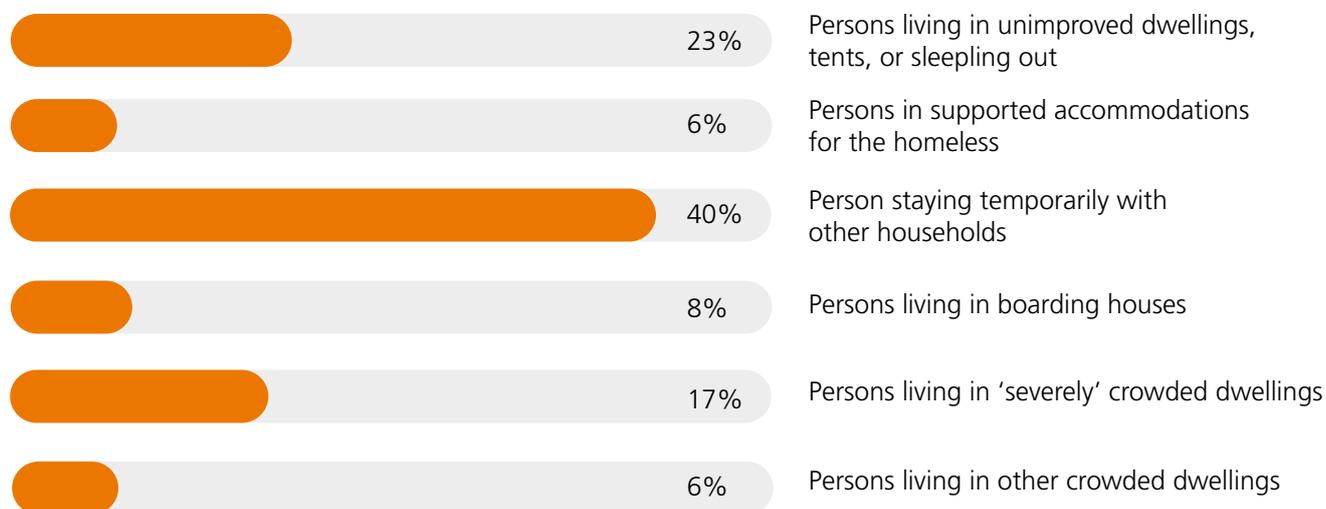
Accurate data on homelessness is difficult to obtain due to the transient and hidden nature of the problem, however it is clear that rates of homelessness have grown both nationally and internationally over the last decade. In the 2016 Census, it was estimated that 116,000 people in Australia were homeless, an increase of 4.6 percent from 2011. People in severely overcrowded dwellings, elderly and younger people, and people sleeping rough were the groups with the largest spikes between the two last Census collections.

The rate of homelessness in Yarra is 95 per 10,000 population, the fourth highest rate for any Victorian municipality, and more than double that of Victoria as a whole (42 per 10,000).<sup>52</sup>

The 2016 estimate of homelessness in Yarra was 838, including 64 people experiencing primary homelessness (i.e. living in tents, improvised dwellings, or sleeping out), a similar number to the 2011 Census.<sup>53</sup> The on-the-ground officer and assertive outreach experience is however of consistent growth in numbers of reported rough sleeping sites, and increasing complexity of incidents related to primary homelessness. See Figure 3 below on page 24.

**ROUGH SLEEPERS ARE THE MOST VISUAL HOMELESS GROUP, BUT ARE ONLY A SMALL PROPORTION OF PEOPLE WHO ARE HOMELESS.<sup>54</sup>**

Figure 1: Proportion of homeless in Yarra by living situation, 2016



<sup>52</sup>'Estimating Homelessness, 2016'.

<sup>53</sup>'Estimating Homelessness, 2016'; 'Estimating Homelessness, 2011'.

Based on the 2016 Census, the largest homeless group in Yarra was persons living in boarding houses, followed by persons living in over-crowded dwellings or supported accommodation for the homeless.<sup>54</sup>

According to the AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services data 290,300 people were assisted by specialist homelessness agencies across Australia in 2018–19, equivalent to one in 86 Australians. In Victoria, 112,900 clients were assisted by specialist homelessness services.<sup>55</sup>

#### Of these:

- 36 percent were homeless on first presentation
- 61 percent were female and 39 percent male
- 1 in 10 were Indigenous
- domestic and family violence and financial difficulties were the top reasons for seeking assistance (44 percent respectively)
- 37 percent sought assistance because of housing crisis
- 9 in 10 clients (91 percent) at risk of homelessness were assisted to maintain housing
- 3 in 10 clients (29 percent) who were homeless were assisted into housing
- On average, 105 requests for assistance went unmet each day.<sup>56</sup>

## KEY FINDINGS

The rate of homelessness in Yarra is 95 per 10,000 population, the fourth highest rate for any Victorian municipality, and more than double that of Victoria as a whole (42 per 10,000).

In 2018–19, 1,228 homelessness clients were recorded in Yarra, of which 621 were female and 607 male. This amounts to a 14 percent increase from the previous year.

Most homeless or marginally housed people in Yarra are relatively young – aged 20–29, followed by the 30–39 years age bracket. Notably, about 160 children were recorded in both the ABS estimates in 2016 and specialist homelessness services client data for Yarra (2018–19).<sup>57</sup> See Figure 2, opposite.

It is important to note that although data from the ABS Census and Specialist Homelessness Services Collection gives us some indication of the extent of the problem, a 2014 national survey from the ABS found that in the previous 10 years the majority of people who experienced homelessness (67 percent) did not approach services for assistance at the time of their most recent episode of homelessness.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>54</sup>'Estimating Homelessness, 2016'.

<sup>55</sup>AIHW, Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2018–19.

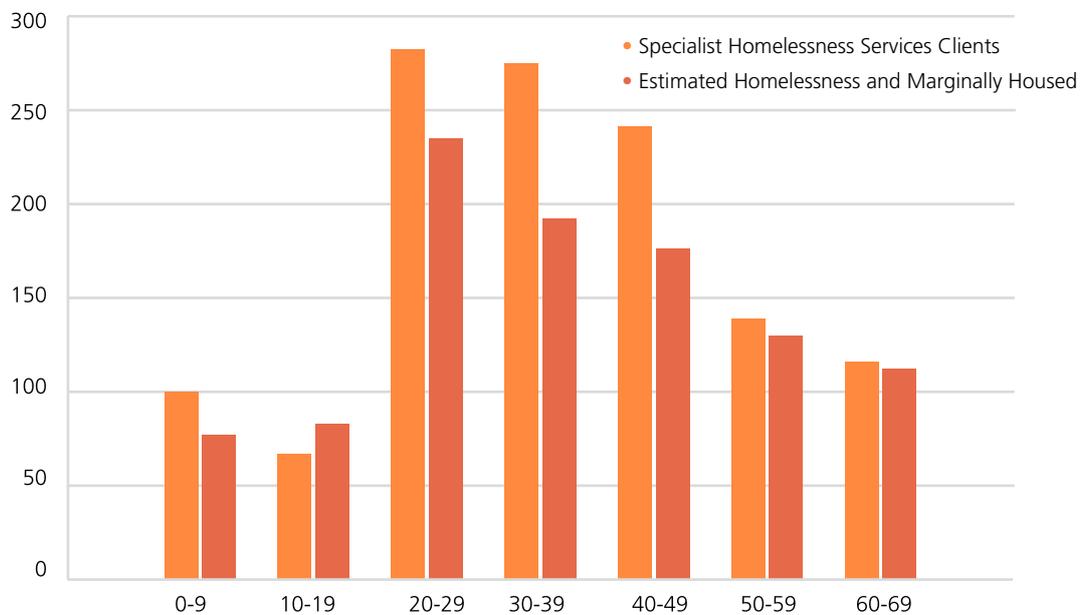
<sup>56</sup>Homelessness workers at housing program entry points in Yarra advised during the consultation that, prior to COVID-19, their daily emergency accommodation allocations were exhausted by 9am. Anyone requiring crisis accommodation after this would have to be turned away.

<sup>57</sup>'Estimating Homelessness, 2016' and 'Specialist Homelessness Services Collection data cubes 2011–12 to 2018–19'.

<sup>58</sup>Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015.

MOST HOMELESS OR MARGINALLY HOUSED PEOPLE IN YARRA ARE RELATIVELY YOUNG – AGED 20–29, FOLLOWED BY THE 30–39 YEARS AGE BRACKET.

Figure 2: Age profile of homeless population in Yarra



Source: AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services clients, 2018–19 and ABS Census of Population and Housing, Estimating Homelessness, 2016

## Counting rough sleepers

Yarra has two methods to gauge the number of people sleeping out in our city. The first is tracking the number and location of rough sleeping sites that Council officers refer to assertive outreach. The number of referrals doubled in the last year, and as can be seen in the chart below, there has been a steady increase in rough sleeping referrals throughout Yarra during the past five years.

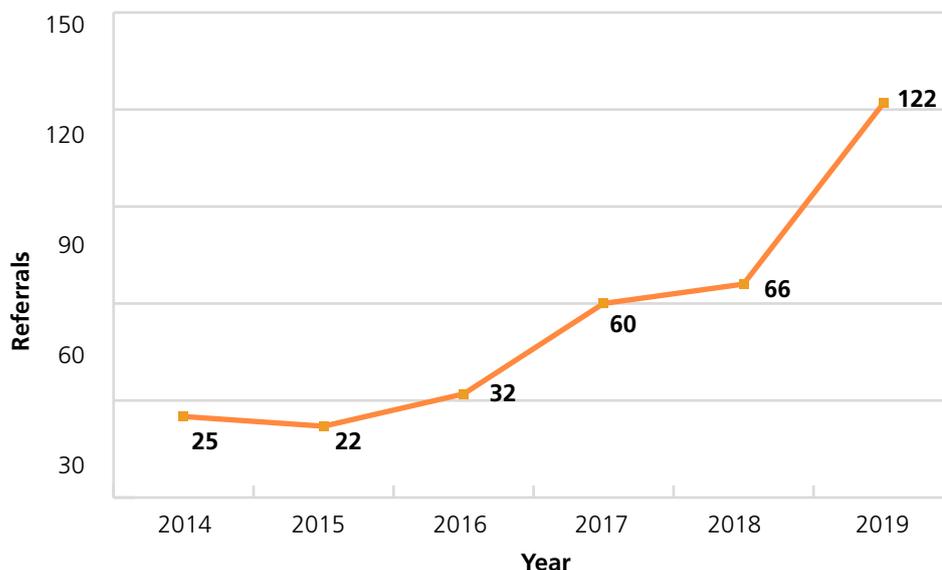
For each site counted in this data, there may be multiple people referred to outreach services. The second method of monitoring in which Yarra participates gives a snapshot of the number of rough sleepers across inner-city municipalities (Melbourne, Port Phillip, Maribyrnong, Stonnington

and Yarra) by doing a head count of people who are sleeping out in winter every two years.

In the last snapshot, which was undertaken on Tuesday 19 June 2018, 392 people were counted sleeping rough in inner Melbourne, including 29 people in Yarra. Of these 392 people, 78 percent were male, 22 percent were female, and 54 percent were aged 26–40.

ANY ATTEMPT TO COUNT HOMELESSNESS WILL ALWAYS BE INDICATIVE AND LIKELY AN UNDERREPRESENTATION.

Figure 3: Rough sleeping sites referred to outreach in City of Yarra, 2014–19



## 'HARRY'

**HARRY IS A SHY 59-YEAR-OLD MAN WITH A MILD INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY WHO LIVES IN A PARK. HE HAS LONG AGO LOST CONTACT WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS. HE SITS ON A BENCH MOST OF THE DAY AND SNEAKS INTO CINEMAS IN THE CITY WHEN THE WEATHER IS BAD. HARRY SLEEPS IN A MORE SHELTERED AREA AT NIGHT SOMETIMES IN THE PUBLIC TOILETS.**

Harry has a history of working as a welder and decided that he no longer wished to work after he had been made redundant about 5 years ago. He did not wish to go through the process of Newstart and therefore has no income. He had a chronic gambling addiction and had no savings so was soon unable to pay the rent at the caravan park where he lived and became homeless.

Harry accesses the showers at cohealth Fitzroy and is known to staff there. His food, clothing and footwear are provided by local residents and workers who have gotten to know him over his time at the park.

A Community Health Nurse from the Homeless Persons' Program became involved when he was diagnosed with a skin cancer on his nose by a consultant at St Vincent's who spoke with Harry every day and often gave him food. The consultant had already arranged for an outpatient appointment.

The Homeless Persons' Program assisted Harry to obtain a Medicare card and coordinated appointments. A nurse also accompanied him to those appointments and assisted him to communicate and understand what was happening. It was decided that he would require the lesion to be removed. He was then assisted to access The Cottage until he no longer required wound dressings.

The Community Health Nurse also organised for Harry to have an eye test and be provided with a pair of spectacles at no cost by The College of Optometry after he identified that his vision was an issue.

Harry still does not wish to obtain a healthcare card, Centrelink payments or accommodation and states that he is happy with his life. He says that he feels safe where he is staying and after his recent experiences, he feels able to seek help if he has the need.



## Best practice responses to homelessness

There has been a recent policy shift away from responding to homelessness after the fact, to preventative approaches that aim to avoid homelessness in the first instance. This shift has been shown to prevent potential further trauma for the individual and save government funds by better directing resources, and reducing need for supportive services long term. Where homelessness has occurred, it is recognised that providing long-term secure housing is the first and most essential step to creating a sustainable pathway out of homelessness, and the capacity to address associated factors.

Furthermore, economists from PricewaterhouseCoopers have provided evidence of the economic benefits to housing homeless people.<sup>59</sup> The analysis undertaken by the two authors finds that governments could save \$250 million annually in health, justice and welfare services if the most vulnerable homeless people were provided social housing. A 2017 cost-benefit analysis from SGS Economics and Planning also found that it is significantly cheaper for governments to provide 'last-resort housing' than to have people sleeping on the streets. The study found that for every \$1 invested in last resort beds, \$2.70 worth of benefits are generated for the community over 20 years.<sup>60</sup> This proves that not only is the moral imperative there to provide housing to people in need, so too is the economic.

There is much to gain in economic and social terms, both for government and society, by assisting the homeless. If you provide people with a roof over their head, we see savings in demand for health care especially emergency department admissions; reduced crime rate – people who are homeless especially sleeping rough are more involved in crime as both victims and perpetrators - and importantly also improved human capital. So people are better able, once they have a roof over their head, to re-engage with the workforce and education and contribute to society.<sup>61</sup>

The 2018 FEANTSA<sup>62</sup> 3rd Overview of Housing Exclusion in Europe, notes that only two countries in Europe have succeeded in reducing the number of homeless people in recent years. Finland saw a 10 percent drop between 2013 and 2016, and Norway a 36 percent reduction between 2012 and 2016. Both of these countries approached homelessness as a housing problem, as well as a violation of human rights, treating it therefore as something that can be solved, rather than the inevitable result of an individual's issues.<sup>63</sup>

TREATING ACCESS TO SAFE, AFFORDABLE AND APPROPRIATE HOUSING AS A HUMAN RIGHT IS KEY TO PREVENTING AND REDUCING THE INCIDENCE OF HOMELESSNESS.

For many 'at risk' and homeless people who do not have complex needs, access to affordable housing may be all that they need to avoid homelessness.

<sup>59</sup>Thorpe and Babilie, 2019.

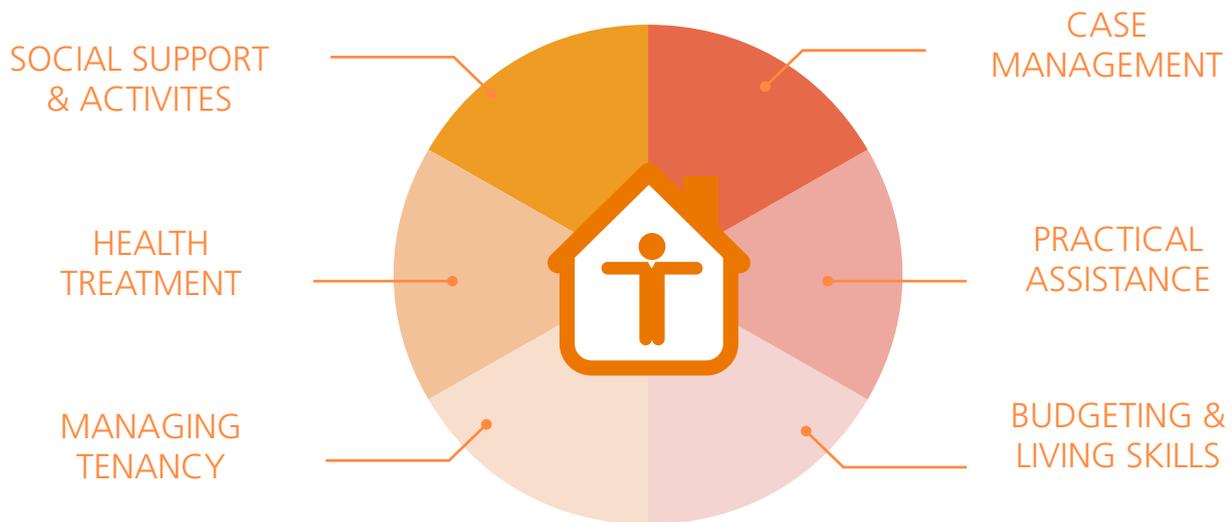
<sup>60</sup>Witte et al., 2017.

<sup>61</sup>Witte et al., 2017.

<sup>62</sup>European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless.

<sup>63</sup>Foundation Abbé Pierre and FEANTSA, 2018.

Figure 4: Housing First Model



Source: Council to Homeless Persons

Providing access to housing that is safe and affordable would resolve the homelessness experienced by many people, including most of those who are newly sleeping rough... However, people who are long-term rough sleepers with more complex needs, including mental illness, substance use, disability and histories of trauma, commonly require both housing and support to gain and sustain that housing – an approach called Housing First or permanent supportive housing.<sup>64</sup>

### Housing First

As outlined above, the causes of homelessness are complex and homeless people often face a number of health and wellbeing issues.

When responding to homelessness, Australian and international research indicates however, that the most effective approach is to secure stable housing first, and then address additional complex needs through targeted 'wraparound' services.<sup>65</sup>

This is known as the 'Housing First' model.

By providing long-term instead of temporary housing, it is believed that people who were experiencing homelessness can shift their focus from worrying about where they will sleep to overcoming other difficulties in their lives and improving their wellbeing. This inverts previous practice where services sought first to address personal issues, such as illness or addiction, as a prerequisite to accessing long-term housing.

<sup>64</sup>Council to Homeless Persons, 2017.

<sup>65</sup>Council to Homeless Persons, 2018.

The Housing First model began in the United States in the early 1990s and has since been applied in various formats internationally, including in Australia. Evaluations of Housing First programs have found markedly higher retention of housing for participants in these programs. Data from the UK also suggests that it is a cost-efficient approach for governments.<sup>66</sup>

Despite general support for the approach in Australia, there have been challenges in rolling out Housing First programs due to a lack of affordable housing stock.<sup>67</sup>

**Lack of affordable housing, particularly for singles, is both driving an increase in rough sleeping, and is hampering the capacity of support services to assist people out of homelessness. In order to succeed, a permanent supportive housing model requires investment in as many housing opportunities as are provided in support. A much larger number of housing opportunities is needed to prevent the flow of new people into rough sleeping, and other forms of homelessness.<sup>68</sup>**

## KEY FINDINGS

The combination of housing and support is at the core of best practice and is a crucial step to reducing homelessness.

### Wraparound Services

In accordance with the Housing First model, once housing has been secured, people often require targeted and tailored wraparound services that are specific to their situation, in order to maintain their housing long term and rebuild their lives.

Wraparound services are a program of different types of support services coordinated and delivered through a holistic method, taking into account each person's circumstances and particular needs. Multiple services work in a complementary that extends beyond any immediate crisis, as a way to build long-term capabilities for individuals and families, providing the necessary life skills to sustain a more stable living situation into the future.<sup>69</sup>

In order for wraparound services to be effective, a collaborative and coordinated services system is required that enables simple referrals that don't require people to retell their story multiple times. Services might include support to maintain tenancies, alcohol and drug treatment, mental health care, parenting support, education and employment programs, as well as a myriad of other supports required by the individual.

Although housing is vitally important, being housed is not sufficient in and of itself to ensure that people are able to maintain a tenancy in the longer term, and participate in society. These services are also part of the crucial social infrastructure to help prevent homelessness from recurring, or from happening in the first place.

<sup>66</sup>AHURI, 2018.

<sup>67</sup>AHURI, 2018.

<sup>68</sup>Council to Homeless Persons, 2017.

<sup>69</sup>House of Representatives Select Committee on Intergenerational Welfare Dependence, 2019, p.45.

While assertive outreach services, where service providers seek out people who are homeless to offer support, are essential, providing supportive, holistic in-reach services *before* a person at risk reaches the tipping point into homelessness, enables that that risk to be mitigated and ultimately prevented.

### Health and Homelessness

Both the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) and the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners recognise that housing and homelessness are key social determinants of health.<sup>70</sup> AIHW notes that there is a growing body of work demonstrating the substantial gaps in life expectancy between those who have stable long-term housing and those who do not, and that co-morbidities and complex health conditions are frequent amongst the homeless population, impacting substantially on and also emerging from their situation.<sup>71</sup>

The role of primary healthcare in preventing and addressing homelessness is essential. As has been so starkly illustrated by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is impossible to look after your health if you are not housed. In Yarra, service providers including Bolton Clarke, St Vincent's Hospital, cohealth and North Richmond Community Health all run specialised homeless-focussed outreach and in-reach health programs to provide healthcare for people who are homeless, at risk or marginally housed. Innovative program delivery brings these services directly to people wherever they are, while partnerships between services provide linked-up referrals and offer a consistent point of care.

<sup>70</sup>AIHW, 'Health of People Experiencing Homelessness'; and Lyons, 2017.

<sup>71</sup>AIHW, 'Health of People Experiencing Homelessness'.







# POLICY CONTEXT

## Overview

Homelessness policy, funding and programs are delivered across all three tiers of government, and through considerable service offerings from the not-for-profit sector (largely funded by government). Although the primary responsibility and resource allocation lies with state and federal governments, local governments engage daily with people who are homeless, sleeping rough, or at risk, and many councils have programs to address and respond to homelessness.

## Australian Government

The Commonwealth Government primarily funds homelessness services and housing support through the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA) and it provides Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) to help keep people housed. The Commonwealth also funds domestic and family violence accommodation and other cohort-specific programs, and provide grants and low cost loans to the community housing sector through the National Housing Finance and Investment Corporation (NHVIC). It also sets the structural and economic policies that shape the broader housing market.

Notably, there is no national homelessness strategy or policy document.

## **National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA)**

The NHHA is a bilateral agreement between the federal government and the states and territories. In July 2018 the NHHA replaced the previous National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness and the National Affordable Housing Agreement, joining the two streams of housing and homelessness. The NHHA includes \$125 million set aside for homelessness services in 2019–20. States and territories are expected to match this funding.

### **Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA)**

CRA provides a capped 'top-up' income support for households on income-support payments, based on the rent households pay in the private market or community housing. It is not available to people in public housing. CRA does not contribute to new affordable housing supply, and affordability is not guaranteed.

### **Victorian Government**

The principal plan guiding Victoria's response to homelessness is Victoria's homelessness and rough sleeping action plan (2018).<sup>72</sup> Additionally, the Victorian Government have set out their intentions to increase the supply of affordable housing through the Homes for Victorians (2017) strategy and Plan Melbourne 2017–2050.

### **Homelessness and rough sleeping**

Victoria's homelessness and rough sleeping action plan is a framework for reducing the incidence and impacts of rough sleeping with a focus on prevention and early intervention. The action plan is guided by four key themes:

1. Intervening early to prevent homelessness
2. Providing stable accommodation as quickly as possible
3. Support to maintain stable accommodation
4. An effective and responsive homelessness services system

The action plan outlines a number of funding streams and programs aimed to reduce the incidence and impact of rough sleeping and homelessness. These include temporary accommodation, early intervention packages, family violence housing and private rental brokerage.

<sup>72</sup>DHHS, 2018.

### **Affordable Housing**

Homes for Victorians (2017) and Plan Melbourne 2017–2050 outline initiatives and funding streams that aim to increase the number of social and affordable housing dwellings in Victoria, largely through public-private partnerships, but crucially they set no target of how many dwellings that need to be added in the coming period.<sup>73</sup>

Despite all these initiatives, there is no sign of a decrease in homelessness in the short-term, nor a significant increase in social and affordable housing.

### **Homelessness services in Victoria**

Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) is an umbrella term for a range of agencies that provide support to people experiencing or at-risk of homelessness and receive funding under the NHHA (from both state and federal governments).<sup>74</sup> These services are delivered by a range of not-for-profit organisations through a centralised access point, referred to as 'Opening Doors' in Victoria.

SHS can provide assistance to access short-term or long-term housing and help people at risk to remain housed. Temporary housing is generally provided by registered housing agencies. This includes transitional housing, crisis accommodation, as well as emergency accommodation which is paid for by a homelessness service but provided in the private sector such as motels, rooming or boarding houses. SHS can also assist people into longer term housing in the private rental market or through applications for social housing.

In addition to housing support, SHS also provide a broad range of general support services, including case management, material aid, meals, laundry and showers, and referrals to specialist services as required (such as health, mental health, drug and alcohol, and legal services).<sup>75</sup>

<sup>73</sup>Infrastructure Victoria have estimated a need for approximately 30,000 new affordable dwellings across Victoria within 0–10 years. See DHHS, 2018.

<sup>74</sup>Launch Housing, 2019.

<sup>75</sup>Launch Housing, 2019.

## Local government

Although the main economic and policy drivers to address homelessness at a broader scale are at the state and federal level, councils in Victoria are finding different ways to play an active role in addressing the alarming increase in homelessness. President of the Australian Local Government Association, Mayor David O'Loughlin, notes that local councils are now positioned 'at the forefront of community efforts to tackle Australia's worsening housing affordability and homelessness challenges.'<sup>76</sup>

These are some of the ways that local governments in Victoria are currently engaging with homelessness:

- Protocols to assist council staff and the community in responding to rough sleeping
- Information and education through council websites and other forums
- Partnerships with, and/or funding of, outreach services
- Delivery of council programs and services to homeless people
- Community grants
- Facilitating networks for the homelessness services industry
- Advocacy to other levels of government
- Various strategies to support an increase in short and long-term affordable housing options for the homeless
- Primary research
- A minority of Councils leverage land holdings to increase supply of dwellings to low income households, including persons who may be exiting homelessness.

<sup>76</sup>ALGA, 2019.

The majority of local governments in Australia do not, however, see responding to homelessness as part of core business. This may in part be philosophical as it can be perceived as cost shifting from other levels of government. Yarra Council believes there is value to having a coordinated and clear response to homelessness at the municipal level and recognises that, given the transient nature of homelessness, it is imperative to also work collaboratively across municipal boundaries and in particular with our inner-city neighbours.

## Statutory responsibilities

Part of the policy environment in which all levels of government operate is legislative, defined by the various acts of parliament that describe the statutory roles and responsibility of the municipalities. In Victoria, the key legislative driver is the Local Government Act 2020, which expressly outlines the role of local government and the governance, responsibilities and function of the councillors.<sup>77</sup> In addition to this, local governments in Victoria have statutory duties with respect to public health, wellbeing and safety under The Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008.<sup>78</sup> Both of these acts inform Council's considerations with regard to responding to homelessness in the municipality and directly shape elements of Yarra's operational response to rough sleeping sites.

Another important legislative instrument under which all Victorian Local Government Authorities have statutory responsibilities is the Building Act 1993.<sup>79</sup> The Municipal Building Surveyor's role is to carry out duties that ensure safety of the built environment in the municipality. In built-up urban areas such as Yarra, there are many dimensions to this role, particularly with regard to public spaces and determining whether a building is fit for purpose and able to be occupied or used safely.

<sup>77</sup>Local Government Act 2020.

<sup>78</sup>The Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008.

<sup>79</sup>Building Act 1993.

Sometimes when a rough sleeping site is situated in a place that poses a danger to the person sleeping there or the wider community, the Municipal Building Surveyor is required to close it down to ensure everyone’s safety. When this happens in Yarra, the Municipal Building Surveyor works with officers from Yarra’s Community Wellbeing Division to coordinate support and referrals for people who are homeless to minimise the impact on them.

**Yarra’s whole-of-Council response**

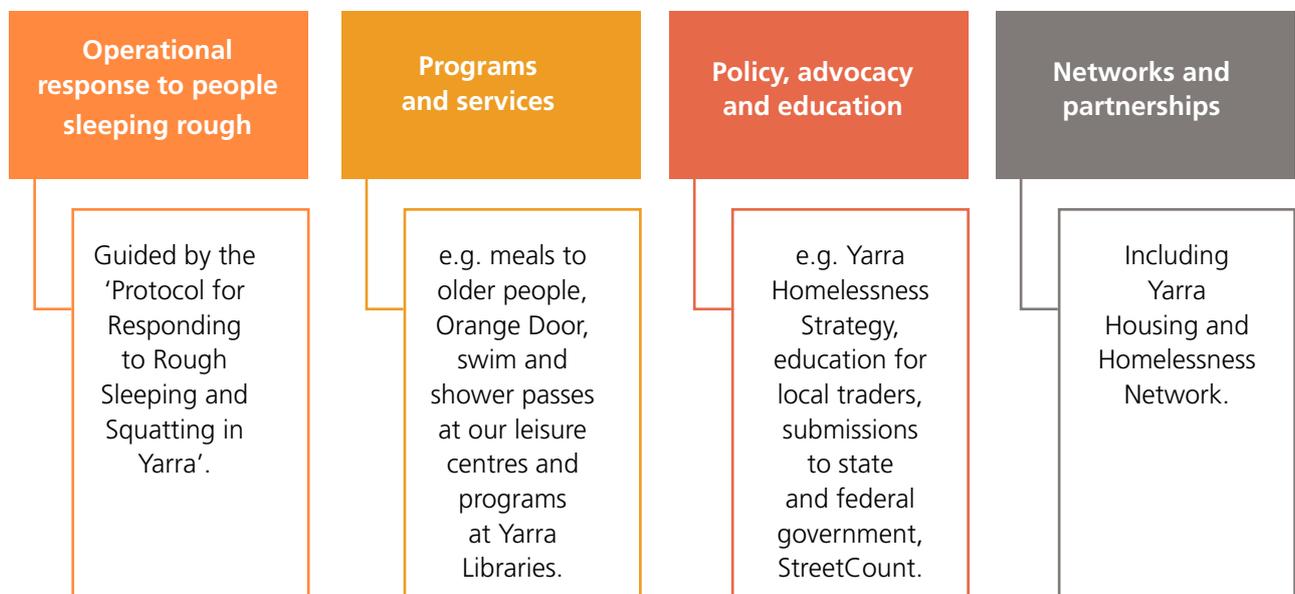
Council engages with homelessness through a range of actions, all of which focus on human rights and our duty of care to people, wellbeing, public health and community safety. We do this through policy, education, advocacy, services and programs, by participating in and facilitating partnerships and networks, and through our operational response to people sleeping rough in public spaces. Below is an illustration of Council’s current work with homelessness.

**Operational response**

Council’s operational response to homelessness is guided by our ‘Protocol for Responding to Rough Sleeping and Squatting in Yarra’ (the Protocol), and by our Emergency Management response to people sleeping rough in extreme weather.

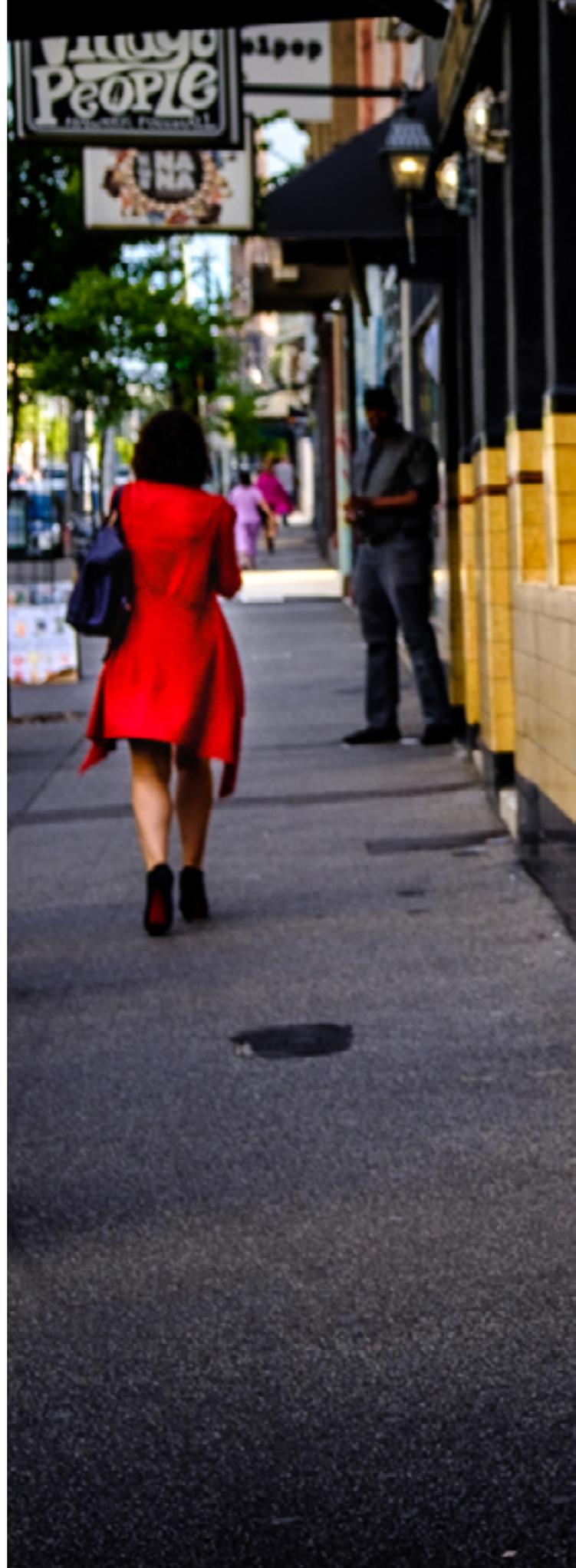
The Protocol was developed in 2012 in response to increasing numbers of people sleeping rough in Yarra. In consultation with Hanover Assertive Outreach team (now Launch Housing) and other local homelessness services, Council initially designed this internal protocol to assist staff to respond effectively and compassionately to rough sleeping and squatting, and has made this guide available to the Yarra community.

Figure 5: Yarra’s approach to homelessness



Rough sleeping referrals in Yarra come to Council from community members and staff, often out of concern for a person's welfare and community safety. Each referral is directed to the Rough Sleeping Initiative (RSI) team at Launch Housing and a skilled team member then visits the site to work with people on their housing situation and other needs. Launch Housing in turn advises Council on the status of people they engage with, so that we can understand who is sleeping rough in Yarra and why. We keep track of all referrals that come through Council and work with Launch Housing to understand the course and circumstance of each situation.

We do our best to be respectful and helpful to everyone in our community, including people experiencing homelessness, while keeping the municipality safe, clean and tidy. We recognise that sometimes people in the community may be confronted by the difficult circumstances that present when people who are rough sleeping engage in risky or anti-social behaviours. Where there are concerns for immediate safety we work with local law enforcement to address any danger. While we do not seek to criminalise homelessness in our policy or actions, we recognise the role of the police in ensuring community safety, which is another important part in balancing our competing duties of care to the community.



## Programs and Services

Council delivers a range of services and programs to people who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness.

### Aged and Disability Services

As part of the program funding provided by the Federal and State Governments for older people and people with disability, our Aged and Disability Services (ADS) provides annual funding of more than \$100,000 for nutritional programs run in partnership with local service providers, such as the Café Meals program, St Vincent's Soup Van, St Mary's House of Welcome and cohealth's Billabong BBQ. Through these and other programs we are able to provide meals to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. We also fund support services for people who reside in local rooming houses so that they can maintain their daily living activities. The ADS team also handle referrals to assist people living in poor conditions, coordinating connections with support services to assist them in transitioning to better living arrangements.

### Family Support

Through our Family Support team – and in particular their interface with the state-wide domestic and family violence and child protection network 'Orange Door' – Council supports many vulnerable residents who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Most referrals to this service come from police or child protection authorities and once they are referred to one of Council's five case workers they work intensively with the family to improve their situation. Support around housing is a key issue with many living in unsuitable and unstable accommodation and in varying situations of homelessness or risk of homelessness.

### Youth Services

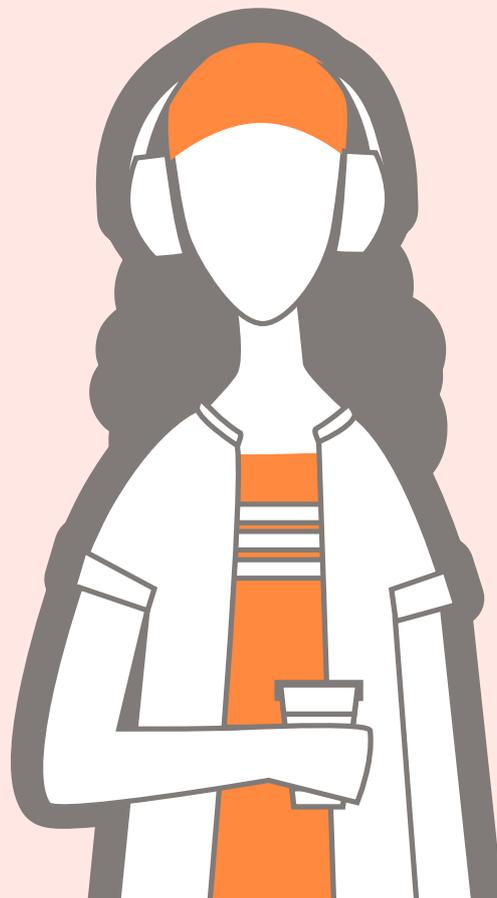
Yarra Youth Services deliver case management to young people through their Youth Support Program. Housing instability is a recurring issue with about a third of clients requiring some form of housing support. Youth support workers connect the young people to appropriate services, including housing through organisations such as Frontyard and Launch Housing, but many have complex, intersecting issues that sometimes limit their eligibility for housing.

## 'LINDA'

**LINDA LIVES IN A ROOMING HOUSE. EVERY WEEK SHE LEAVES THE CHAOS AND NOISE OF HER RESIDENCE AND GOES TO HER FAVOURITE CAFÉ AS PART OF THE CAFÉ MEALS PROGRAM.**

She enjoys having a cooked meal while reading the paper or chatting to the friendly staff. It is a welcome and enjoyable reprieve from her living situation and makes her life feel 'normal' for a while.

Linda is waiting for housing where she can feel safe and have her own kitchen to cook meals in.



### **Yarra Leisure**

Yarra Leisure offers free shower and pool passes to people who are homeless. This program started in late 2018 as an emergency management response to give relief to rough sleepers during heat waves but has since been expanded, and passes are now distributed regularly through Council's Engagement Officer Rough Sleeping and Homelessness and the local RSI team at Launch Housing. Yarra Leisure also offer a heavily discounted membership program to community organisations who can purchase cheap memberships on behalf of vulnerable clients.

### **Yarra Libraries**

Yarra Libraries is a community hub where everyone is welcome. The Yarra Libraries team works constantly on finding ways to maximise community access to resources and remove barriers so that everyone has equitable access to library spaces and services. In addition to running topical events that educate, inform and engage the community, Yarra Libraries has a network of community partners and facilitates specialist programs such as Feel Good Fridays (supported by the Ewing Trust), a social space for people sleeping rough, Open Table community meals, and a regular drop-in space with Council to Homeless Persons. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Yarra Libraries has been instrumental in facilitating Yarra's food security programs and reaching out to our community to maintain social connections and provide ongoing services.

### **Advocacy and Education**

Council is a strong advocate for the most vulnerable in our community and continues to advocate to other levels of government in support of people who are homeless when opportunities arise. We do this through submissions to state and federal inquiries and by educating our community and organisation about homelessness in an evidence-based and compassionate way.

This Strategy aligns with other Council strategies and policies, such as the Social and Affordable Housing Strategy, which seeks to increase the number of affordable dwellings in Yarra, and the forthcoming Social Justice Charter, which outlines our commitment to social equity, and to upholding the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities.

### **Networks and partnerships**

Council convenes a quarterly agency network, the Yarra Housing and Homelessness Network, for frontline workers in the homelessness sector to meet, network and share ideas and issues. Many parts of the organisation also work closely with a range of services to support client groups and vulnerable community members.

We have ongoing working relationships with our neighbouring municipalities to facilitate connections and identify opportunities for a coordinated response to housing and homelessness. In 2018 Yarra participated in the biennial inner-Melbourne rough sleeping count for the first time together with the Cities of Melbourne, Stonnington, Port Phillip and Maribyrnong. The biennial count was delayed in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Council also provides funding through its Community Grants program in the categories of Community Partnerships, Participation and Annual grants, to support front-line organisations in the delivery of homelessness services. Council's Community Housing Grant, part of the Annual Grants program, currently provides \$50,000 per annum to deliver a Community Housing Tenants Support Program, which is focussed on aiding community housing residents to maintain their tenancies, preventing homelessness.





# STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

## Overview

Working within a human rights framework, building on the work that Council is doing already, and guided by Council's identified roles and responsibilities, we have developed the following strategic directions. Each direction is intended to respond to, improve and ultimately prevent homelessness in Yarra. The first strategic direction is where Council has the greatest role to play, so more strategies have been included here than in the other directions, although each direction has an important role to play in working towards our overarching strategy to improve homelessness outcomes in Yarra.



## STRATEGIC DIRECTION 1: DELIVER A COORDINATED AND COMPASSIONATE CRISIS RESPONSE TO PEOPLE WHO ARE SLEEPING ROUGH AND THOSE WHO ARE HOMELESS

Primary homelessness impacts in a variety of ways on individuals who are homeless and on our whole community. Because of this, a significant proportion of Council's homelessness work is focused on our operational response to this type of crisis situation. This involves balancing our duties of care: to support our most vulnerable community members and to maintain amenity and public health and safety.

We recognise that our community will be more empathetic and supportive of people sleeping rough if sites are well maintained and managed by Council and our partners. We will lead by demonstrating the compassion and responsibility that we want to shape our city.

### SD1.1

Ensure Yarra is a welcoming and well-functioning city for all by carefully balancing compassion and amenity in the public realm

#### We will do this by:

- Continuing to fund Council's own Engagement Advisor Homelessness and Rough Sleeping as well as directing funds to specialist homelessness services to enhance local outreach capacity.
- Regularly monitoring rough sleeping sites and taking appropriate action for the wellbeing of the person and community when needed.
- Conducting regular welfare checks and requesting outreach from homelessness services.
- Giving adequate warning and a clear explanation when we need to clean, clear or move a rough sleeping site because:
  - There may be a health risk to the person sleeping rough and/or to the general public.
  - The site may be creating a public safety hazard.
  - Someone's behaviour may be dangerous to themselves or other people, or they may be set up in a risky location.
- Regularly reviewing Yarra's Rough Sleeping Protocol (the Protocol) to ensure it is effective and up-to-date, and continuing to guide Council response to rough sleeping through the (updated) Rough Sleeping Protocol and online reporting tool.
- Delivering community services that are accessible to everyone, e.g. at libraries and leisure centres.

## SD 1.2

### Educate staff and the community on homelessness and how best to respond to people sleeping rough in Yarra

- We will do this by:**
- Giving a voice to people with lived experience (e.g. through events or campaigns).
  - Delivering an annual training and events program to the organisation.
  - Engaging with the community and local traders about the rights of rough sleepers to inhabit public space and responsibilities of Council to maintain public space.
  - Promoting the Protocol and online reporting tool to staff and the community.
  - Regularly reviewing Yarra's Rough Sleeping Protocol (the Protocol) to ensure it is effective and up-to-date, and continuing to guide Council response to rough sleeping through the (updated) Rough Sleeping Protocol and online reporting tool.
  - Updating Council's online homelessness information and resources for people who are homeless or sleeping rough.

## SD 1.3

### Facilitate networks and connections that support a more coordinated homelessness service environment in Yarra, as well as social connections for local people experiencing or at risk of homelessness

- We will do this by:**
- Establishing a whole of organisation homelessness working group to share information and create opportunities for collaboration.
  - Continuing the Yarra Housing and Homelessness Network as a networking and knowledge sharing platform for local health, homelessness and community service providers.
  - Continuing to fund and deliver opportunities to connect for people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness (e.g. Billabong BBQ, library drop-ins and community meals).
  - Exploring, costing and advocating for a Homelessness Service Coordination Program at Yarra, as is currently done at Melbourne and Port Phillip councils.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>80</sup>This program brings together representatives from front-line homelessness agencies on a regular basis to provide individualised service supports for people sleeping rough.

### **SD 1.4**

#### **Deliver an evidence-based advocacy platform in support of rough sleepers' rights and pathways to secure housing**

**We will do this by:**

- Coordinating with surrounding inner-city municipalities to monitor rough sleeping in Yarra.
- Exploring and assessing which methods are best for monitoring rough sleeping in Yarra and using these methods accordingly.
- Staying informed of local, regional and national trends relating to rough sleepers, particularly in a COVID-19 and post-COVID environment.
- Advocating for an appropriately funded and coordinated local service network that has the capacity to support people out of homelessness and to maintain long-term housing.
- Advocating for people with disability to be recognised within the primary cohorts of the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement.

## **STRATEGIC DIRECTION 2: FOCUS ON EARLY INTERVENTION FOR PEOPLE WHO ARE VULNERABLE OR AT RISK TO AVOID HOMELESSNESS AND OTHER CRISES**

The longer someone experiences homelessness, the more severe the long-term impacts.<sup>81</sup> Intervening early to avoid homelessness allows people to restore their lives quicker and avoid further hardship. We recognise that people may experience crises that are beyond their control that can tip their lives into instability. This may be through a sudden loss of income, through illness or disability, at times of family breakdown or violence. Where possible, we will support our residents to maintain their current housing, find new accommodation when needed and minimise impacts of housing stress through other aids such as food relief and connection with specialist services.

## SD 2.1

### Support individuals and families through hardship

**We will do this by:**

- Providing case management and referrals through targeted Community Wellbeing services for young people, older people, families, people with disability and people experiencing family violence.
- Ensuring that the Council Officers who manage Yarra's public spaces, such as libraries, understand the available resources and channels of referral for people who require assistance.
- Staying informed of local, regional and national trends relating to rough sleepers, particularly in a COVID-19 and post-COVID environment.
- Contribute to food relief and other material aid in the municipality for those who do not qualify for other types of government support.

## SD 2.2

### Advocate for tenants' rights and well-funded supports for people at risk of homelessness

**We will do this by:**

- Improved tenants' rights through changes to the Residential Tenancies Act, including stronger rights for people in private market housing to secure tenancies, and working to remove barriers to entry.
- Initiatives that help people at risk of becoming homeless to maintain their tenancies, and seek continued and adequate resourcing for programs like 'Tenancy Plus' and 'More than a Landlord'.<sup>82</sup>
- Better housing pathways and support at known points of vulnerability, such as exiting prison and for young people leaving institutional care.
- The right to safety and support to ensure a future where all members of the community are protected from family violence.
- Universal design principles to make tenancies more accessible and sustainable for people of all ages and abilities.

<sup>81</sup>Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018.

<sup>82</sup>Tenancy Plus is a Victorian Government initiative, formerly the Social Housing Advocacy Support Program (SHASP); More than a Landlord is an Aboriginal Housing Victoria program.

## STRATEGIC DIRECTION 3: WORK TOWARD THE ULTIMATE GOAL OF PREVENTION BY SUPPORTING AN INCREASE OF SOCIAL AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND APPROPRIATE SUPPORT SERVICES

We recognise that the fundamental cause of homelessness is the lack of affordable housing options in our city and beyond, supported by appropriate services to assist people to maintain tenancies and improve their wellbeing. It is difficult, if not impossible, to address other issues if you have no stable home and must constantly worry about where to shelter.<sup>83</sup> We also support the notion that it is only long-term, affordable and appropriate housing that will have any lasting impact in addressing homelessness (and housing stress). Working through our Social and Affordable Housing Strategy (2019) we will leverage the opportunities available to us to increase the number of social and affordable dwellings in Yarra.

### SD 3.1

Increase the supply of affordable housing in Yarra by employing the strategic directions in the Social and Affordable Housing Strategy<sup>84</sup>

#### We will do this by:

- Realising affordable housing outcomes at new developments..
- Making effective and prudent direct investment in social and affordable housing.
- Partnering, facilitating and engaging with stakeholders to increase social and affordable housing in Yarra.
- Continuing to pursue evidence-based, strategic advocacy to other levels of government.

### SD 3.2

Uphold and promote housing as a human right<sup>85</sup>

#### We will do this by:

- Advocating to state and federal governments for social and affordable housing as essential infrastructure.
- Promoting long-term secure, appropriate and affordable housing options as the only real solution to homelessness.

<sup>83</sup>Throughout our consultation this point was raised repeatedly and emphatically by stakeholders and specialist homelessness services.

<sup>84</sup>The commitments listed here for Strategic Direction 3.1 mirror each of the four high-level strategic directions in Yarra's Social and Affordable Housing Strategy (2019).

<sup>85</sup>The commitments in Strategic Direction 3.2 complement the advocacy supported by Yarra's Social and Affordable Housing Strategy (2019).

### SD 3.3

#### Recognise the importance of employment in preventing homelessness

**We will do this by:**

- Advocating for employment opportunities to prevent vulnerability to homelessness.
- Delivering employment support programs through Council's community services.
- Partnering with local service providers to promote employment support programs and opportunities where possible.



# GLOSSARY

**Affordable housing** is 'housing, including social housing that is appropriate for the housing needs of very low, low and moderate income households'.<sup>86</sup> The Victorian Government specifies the income ranges annually for very low, low and moderate income households for affordable housing (that is not social housing). Housing is generally considered affordable if it costs less than 30 percent of household income for the specified income groups.

**Assertive outreach** is when a homelessness service provider purposefully sets out to engage with people who are marginalised and vulnerable due to their situation. This type of outreach is active, rather than passive, and is undertaken when it is thought by the service provider or social worker that someone who needs the service would otherwise not connect with the support they require.

**Case management** refers to a collaborative and planned approach to ensuring that a person who experiences homelessness gets the services and supports (wraparound services) that they need to move forward with their lives. A case worker will assess the needs of the client and, where appropriate, arrange, coordinate and advocate for delivery and access to a range of programs and services designed to meet the individual's needs.

**Community housing** is housing that is owned, controlled and/or managed by a registered community housing agency. It is targeted to low income and/or special needs households who meet income and asset tests, in accordance with the Residential Tenancies Act 1997. Rents are commonly capped at between 25 to 30 percent of household income and can be up to 75 percent of market rent. Many providers incorporate local support services and tenant participation in maintenance and management.

**Crisis and emergency accommodation** is short-term housing managed by not-for-profit organisations. It includes women's refuges, youth refuges and major crisis supported accommodation services. These services are available 24-hours a day, however they are temporary and designed to immediately assist people in crisis to stabilise their situation before they move on to something more permanent.

**Homelessness** is the lack of one or more of the elements that represent 'home'. These include a sense of security, stability, privacy, safety, and the ability to control living space. The term is inclusive of a variety of insecure housing situations, such as couch surfing, staying with family, and living in temporary accommodation, such as a hotel or rooming house.

The ABS considers someone to be experiencing homelessness if:

- they are in a dwelling that is inadequate, or
- they have no secure tenure of a dwelling, or if their tenure is short and cannot be extended, or
- they are in a living situation that does not allow them to have control of, or access to, space for social relations.<sup>87</sup>

Another common definition, known as the cultural definition, divides homelessness into categories that recognise the diversity of situations for people living outside of the minimum standard of housing:<sup>88</sup>

- Primary homelessness: people without conventional accommodation (living on the streets, in deserted buildings, improvised dwellings, under bridges, in parks, etc.)
- Secondary homelessness: people moving between various forms of temporary shelter including friends, emergency accommodation, youth refuges, hostels and boarding houses

<sup>86</sup>Planning and Environment Act 1987 (Vic).

<sup>87</sup>Estimating Homelessness, 2016'.

<sup>88</sup>Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008.

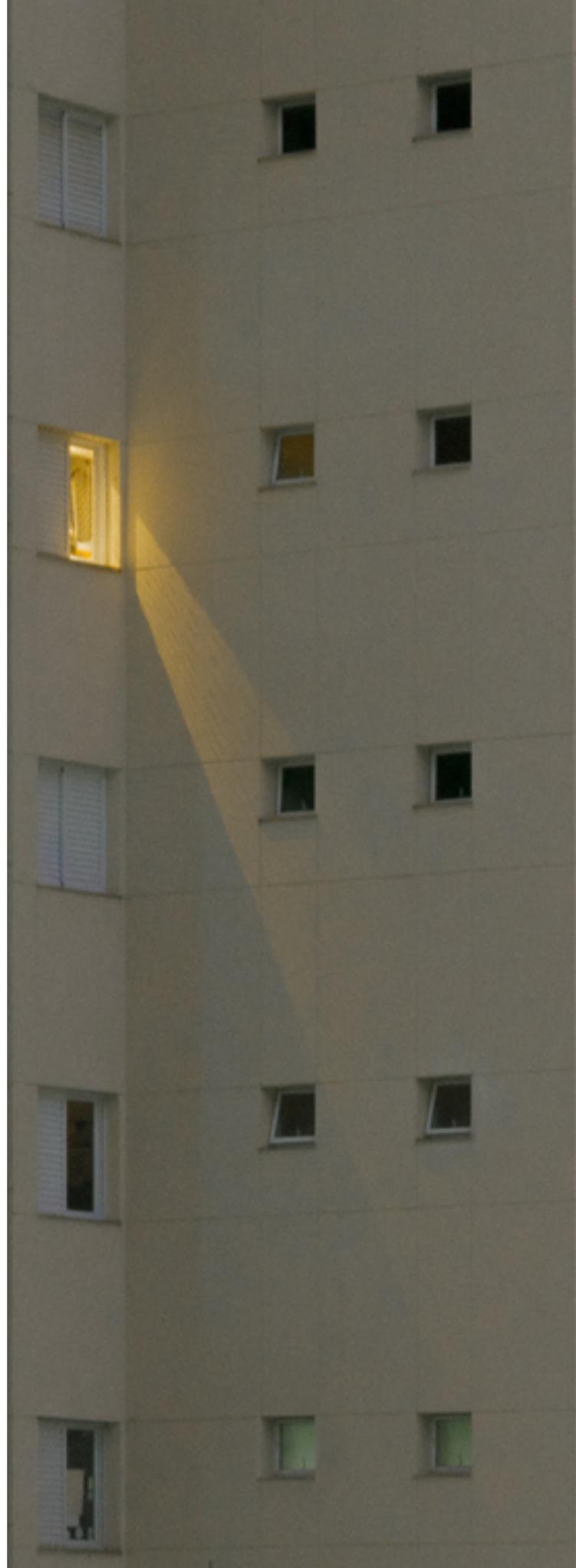
- Tertiary homelessness: people living in single rooms in private boarding houses without their own bathroom, kitchen or security of tenure

**Housing First** refers to a way of addressing homelessness by providing secure, long-term housing as quickly as possible to people who are homeless, and then providing comprehensive services to them to address the other issues and complexities of their circumstances. By providing long-term instead of temporary housing, it is believed that people who were experiencing homelessness can shift their focus from worrying about where they will sleep to overcoming other difficulties in their lives and improving their wellbeing.

**Public housing** is a form of long-term rental social housing that is predominantly owned and managed by the State Government housing authority. It usually refers to rental housing that is targeted to very-low and low income households on an affordable basis (requiring no more than 25 percent of income on rent). These households are predominantly those in receipt of Commonwealth income support, such as the disability or aged pension. Tenure is not time limited but is subject to tenants meeting rental conditions contained in their tenancy agreement with the Department of Health and Human Services.

**Rooming houses** (also referred to as 'boarding houses') are buildings where one or more rooms are available to rent individually, accommodating four or more people. At most rooming houses, residents share bathrooms, kitchens, laundries and other common areas. Rooming house operators must comply with minimum standards set out in the Residential Tenancies (Rooming House Standards) Regulations 2012. These standards relate to privacy, security, safety and amenity in rooming houses.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>89</sup>Residential Tenancies (Rooming House Standards) Regulations 2012 (Vic),



**Rough Sleepers** are people who sleep or are bedded down in the open air. They may also be sleeping in buildings or other places not designed for habitation, such as sheds, car parks, abandoned buildings and so on. It is generally understood that this group of people is one of the most marginalised and vulnerable in the community.

**Social housing** is short and long-term rental housing that is owned and run by the government or not-for-profit agencies. It includes both *Public Housing* and *Community Housing* (as per the Housing Act 1983). Public housing is government owned and managed, whereas community housing is managed (and sometimes owned) by not-for-profit organisations. All social housing must be applied for through the Victorian Housing Register.

**Specialist homelessness** services (SHS) is the type of assistance provided by a specialist homelessness agency with the aim of responding to or preventing homelessness for an individual. This kind of assistance will often include multiple services that go beyond the provision of accommodation. Additional supports are often aimed at assisting a person to sustain housing in the longer term, and may include life skills (e.g. domestic tasks), mental and physical health services, specialised counselling for family violence and/or drug and alcohol addiction, legal support, financial counselling, cultural support and employment services.

**Transitional Housing** is a supported short-term accommodation program. It acts as a stepping stone to more permanent housing. People moving into transitional housing have often been victims of a change in circumstance. For example, a lost job has meant the rent can't be paid, a marriage break-up leaves one partner with no money or support, or a person may lose the support of – or can no longer live with – other family members. A key element of transitional housing is that it's a temporary option, and tenants must actively work with their support provider to apply for long-term housing.

**Wraparound services** are support services delivered through a holistic method that is tailored to each person, taking into account their circumstances and particular needs. In a wraparound approach, multiple services are coordinated so as to work collaboratively in a way that is responsive to each aspect of a person's situation. Wraparound services are particularly used to build long-term capabilities for individuals and families, which extend beyond any immediate crisis, providing skills to sustain a more stable living situation into the future.



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