



McAuley Community Services for Women

A ministry of the Sisters of Mercy

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**Homelessness should never
be the safer option.**



Homelessness is never the safer option

The incidence of homelessness for women in Victoria is increasing as a result of insufficient affordable housing, poverty, family violence and mental illness. Between 2006 and 2011, the rate of homeless in Victoria increased by 20% (ABS, 2011).

Over the past year the City of Melbourne reports that homelessness within the city has increased by 40%.

This trend can be turned around if policies that focus on why homelessness occurs in the first instance are put in place together with more strategic funding for services housing and programs.

The issues facing women who are homeless are different to those facing men. McAuley Community Services for Women is concerned that if we don't get the right help to women at the right time, and coordinate preventative support around women's housing, which addresses all their needs simultaneously, the risk is that more women will fall through the gap and feel they are failing.

The truth is the policies and programs are failing women who are homeless.

McAuley Community Services for Women is calling on all electoral candidates and parties to commit to:

- Funding for programs and an integrated service response to enable women and their children to stay at home without fearing for their lives.
- Funding for a range of housing options, giving women a choice according to their situation, preferences and needs. This includes women-only services.
- Funding for support services that address the specific needs of women, with or without children, and who are homeless either as a result of family violence or mental illness.
- Investment into gendered analysis of all homelessness programs and funding to make sure that women are not continually discriminated against.
- Investment into an affordable housing strategy to increase the supply of low cost homes.

Facts:

On Census night in 2011 there were:

- 22,789 people who were homeless in Victoria
- 10,000 were women
- 302 women were sleeping rough and
- 4,105 women were living in supported accommodation.

In addition:

- One in two women seeking specialist homelessness services do so because of family violence.
- Women are invisible when homeless because most move between family and friends, stay in cars or are in refuges or unsafe rooming houses
- Mental health is increasingly connected to women and homelessness, compounded by a lack of suitable, stable or safe housing.

Current Australian and Victorian approaches to homelessness

Goal setting

In 2008, the Australian, state and territory governments set two goals to guide the long-term response to homelessness:

- To halve overall homelessness by 2020, and
- To offer supported accommodation to all rough sleepers who need it by 2020 through programs such as *Common Ground* and *Street to Home*.

Issues:

- *More men than women are rough sleepers: the policy priorities and funding consequently discriminate against women.*
- *Most women who are homeless enter services such as McAuley Community Services for Women exhausted, often after years of trying to manage their situation themselves – they want their own housing but require 24-hour support, social networks and intense medical attention before being able to live alone*
- *Current programs, such as Common Ground, fund high-density housing developments that do not meet the needs of vulnerable women. This view is supported in our research – and other studies – which shows that women do not like being in a minority in mixed hostels or housing developments as they can feel unsafe in these environments and feel at risk of further social isolation; also staff are not experienced in women's specific issues and in dealing with particular problems such as self-harm or eating disorders.*
- *Many women we work with have a variety of entrenched mental health needs and are therefore less emotionally or psychologically ready to start tackling the complexity of issues they face.*

Victorian Action Plan

The Victorian Homelessness Action Plan 2011- 2015 did not address the structural causes of homelessness nor did it adequately respond to the specific needs of women who are homeless.

Issue:

- *Women are more likely to be affected by poverty, family violence or abuse as a child.*
- *Mixed hostels are not safe for women and often don't have specifically trained staff to assist with the emotional and psychological needs that a woman may have not know where to refer women for help.*
- *There is no public housing strategy to address structural causes of homelessness for women*

No ongoing commitment to the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness

The National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness is due to end in 2015: no further funding has been announced.

Issue:

- *Stop-start funding is risky for any community program, causing concerns for ongoing support for clients, job security for staff and creating further risks for people who are already among the most vulnerable in our society.*
- *Stop-start funding also results in loss of expertise from the sector and of partnerships infrastructure*
- *The current approach in Victoria to recommission programs and to prioritise working with 'larger' organisations is resulting in a loss of specialist services in providing holistic programs, which include personalised support, which is accessible, tailored, and value for money.*

These approaches to homelessness do not understand that women's needs are different.

Discriminating against women

Current programs in place in Victoria discriminate women. These include: Street to Home, Common Ground, the Housing and Support Initiative and the Integrated Rehabilitation and Recovery Care Program.

Street to Home

The *Street to Home* program was introduced to reduce the number of rough sleepers in Australia by providing persistent support to assist them into long-term housing. However, there are more male rough sleepers than women in Australia. There is no comparable policy or program focusing on women who are homeless either with or without children.

Street to Home aims to:

- Assist clients achieve permanent accommodation,
- Provide clients with support for 12 months to maintain permanent accommodation,
- Provide clients with assistance to improve their physical and mental health, and
- Link clients in to support services to maintain their housing after completing the *Street to Home* program.

Issues:

- *In Victoria, Street to Home was originally funded \$4.09m for three years to support 300 clients.*
- *This number has been revised down to support 50 clients each year, about \$27,000 per year with only 12 months support once a client has been placed in housing.*
- *A baseline report by Chamberlain and Johnson, states that 89 per cent of participants were male, with only five women in total, three of whom had partners.*
- *A full evaluation has not been released.*

Housing First / Common Ground

'Housing First' is an approach to assisting people who are chronically homeless by initially providing long-term housing and then engaging them in support – if they wish. This approach has been championed in the US through a program called *Pathways to Housing*, which head-leases properties from the private market for people who are homeless with a mental illness. These properties are 'scattered' throughout communities, with the aim of increasing the social integration of clients.

The *Pathways to Housing* model has been well documented and evaluated. Amongst the findings is that while stable housing has been achieved, it has been less successful in addressing social and economic exclusion. A number of studies have found issues of social isolation and loneliness among Housing First participants, associated with depression, a reduced sense of control and pessimistic social expectations. Other studies found that despite being in stable accommodation, Housing First participants often lacked a sense of involvement with the broader community, a sense of purpose or any meaningful pursuits.

The Victorian *Common Ground* program in Elizabeth Street, Melbourne is modelled on Housing First but is mixed-tenure, high density with onsite social services. Anecdotally Common Ground accommodates 50 men and 15 women (more accurately reflecting the proportion of female rough sleepers.)

Issues

- *Around \$56 million from Federal and Victorian governments has been invested into the Elizabeth Street hostel however the model is not attractive for many women, particularly those who are vulnerable; have experienced trauma or have primary caring responsibilities*
- *Women do not like being in a minority in mixed hostels or housing developments as they can feel unsafe in these environments and feel at risk of further social isolation.*
- *Staff are not trained to help with particular problems facing women such as self-harm or eating disorders.*
- *There has been no evaluation of Common Ground.*

Housing and Accommodation Support Initiative

The Housing and Accommodation Support Initiative (HASI) is held up as a successful model of housing and support for people with mental health issues. It involves intensive case management support for people who are accommodated in independent housing managed by social housing associations. HASI housing and support costs are \$57,530 per person per annum.

The Social Policy Research Centre, found many positive outcomes in terms of tenancy stability, community and social involvement and health.

Issues

- *Women are under-represented in HASI (around a third of participants) and were more likely to leave the program than men.*
- *Given the prevalence of mental health problems amongst women, their hospitalisation rates and other barriers women face in regard to the access and provision of mental health services, the under-representation of women in HASI requires further consideration.*
- *There has been no gendered analysis of the HASI program indicating that its effectiveness for women with mental health issues remains questionable.*

Integrated Rehabilitation and Recovery Care Program

The Integrated Rehabilitation and Recovery Care Program supports people with severe mental health issues to transition from Secure Extended Care Units and Community Care Units. An evaluation showed the program to be effective in improving mental health (in terms of fewer hospitalisations and self reporting of wellbeing); improved living skills; improved health and wellbeing; and transition to sustainable housing but only for a minority of clients.

Issues

- *Only 28 percent of participants in the program were women, however the evaluation lacked a gendered analysis of the outcomes for women.*
- *The evaluation showed that independent accommodation that is integrated within the community does not meet the needs of many people with a mental illness, and that the provision of flexible, ongoing support is crucial to recovery.*

The Housing and Support Needs of Women

Our research shows that women who are homeless or at risk of homelessness want housing that is safe and secure, offers independence but with access to social networks, is well located and serviced by public transport and is affordable.

Women who are homeless with mental health problems are particularly vulnerable and have specific needs including proximity to health services and support with after hours access.

McAuley House model of support

McAuley Community Services for Women operates one of only two homelessness services in Victoria that focuses solely on women without accompanying children. Through McAuley House, we offer safe accommodation as well as practical, social and emotional support, a job's ready program and access to vocational training.

Women who come to McAuley House are diverse in ethnicity, religious and cultural backgrounds and age. Each woman confronts a variety of challenges such as living with a mental or physical illness, family violence, the negative effects of misusing drugs, alcohol or prescribed medication, problem gambling and poor health and loss of family connection.

Over 2013/14, McAuley Community Services for Women supported 93 women at McAuley House. Of these, all were homeless, 30% had experienced family violence, 34% were referred from hospital or mental health service, 73% had a mental health diagnosis and 47% had come from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The program has been modeled on the features that women say they want in housing and support services providing:

- A continuum of housing and support that give women a choice based on their needs and circumstances – from intensive, onsite support in congregated housing, to transitional housing and support which can accommodate family reunion, to intermittent, 'as needs' support for women in long term housing in the community
- Social and economic inclusion through recreation and employment programs run by trained recreation and community case workers
- Integrated health support through a partnership with the Royal District Nursing Service and mental health providers,
- Women only space and support including after hours and respite accommodation and support, individual case planning, access to programs to build support and confidence
- Opportunities to engage informally with through meal sharing and social activities,
- Peer and community support.
- Opportunities to find and maintain jobs and access vocational training.

McAuley House costs \$15,000 per woman a year. The program is able to be rolled out across Australia.

About McAuley Community Services for Women

Each year McAuley Community Services for Women provides accommodation and support for 650 women and children who are experiencing homelessness, due either to family violence or mental illness.

Through our McAuley Care family violence program and McAuley House homelessness program, we assist each woman with accommodation and specialist support services as well as find employment and access vocational training.