



McAuley Community Services for Women

A ministry of the Sisters of Mercy

About McAuley Community Services for Women

McAuley Community Services for women welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to Infrastructure Victoria's 30-year draft strategy. We have limited our comments to the issues relating to women and children's risk of homelessness and difficulties associated with exiting homelessness and family violence.

McAuley Community Services for Women is a ministry of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea.

McAuley accommodates and supports women and children who are experiencing chronic disadvantage through the impact of family violence and homelessness. We work towards the prevention of further incidents of family violence and risk of homelessness and support women who are subject to homelessness through a number of key programs.

Last year we supported around 700 women and children through our wrap-around accommodation and support services and specific programs. We have around 32 houses (80-bed capacity) which we use as transitional housing before women exit either into public housing, private rental accommodation or to return home.

McAuley Care is a twenty-four hour crisis service for women and their accompanying children who are experiencing family violence. The program provides women with safe accommodation, and practical, legal and emotional support. McAuley Care encompasses five refuges as an extension of the service which enables us to provide longer term support for those who need it.

McAuley House supports women who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and who are living with chronic mental illness. McAuley House provides safety and security in a community environment where women can develop the skills and capabilities required to live independently.

Executive Summary

As Victoria's only women-specific organisation supporting women who are homeless or are experiencing family violence, this strategy is to be welcomed.

Our services are in high demand. There is a rise in the number of women reporting family violence incidents. This alongside a lack of affordable housing, high private rent, and limited public and social housing means that there are few options available for women who need to leave violence. Instead they remain in dangerous situations.

We therefore welcome the strategy and its direction. The 30-year strategy has called for a major investment in affordable and social housing, with at least 30,000 new affordable homes to be built within the next decade. Victoria's social housing stock is amongst the lowest in the country with 32,000 Victorians currently waiting for public housing, and people waiting years to get into public housing.

We have also urged both Federal and State governments to develop "a comprehensive plan for providing access to affordable housing, either through subsidies or increasing supply. We are pleased to note that the State Government will be releasing its draft affordable housing strategy and plan in late 2016.

We note however that whilst these extra houses will not solve the problem, they will make a big difference. Housing is a basic human right and one that this strategy recognises.

Specifically for women who are homeless, or at risk, and women and children experiencing family violence

We are pleased to see that this Infrastructure Victoria draft strategy answers many of the issues McAuley Community Services for Women addressed in its submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence, namely:

The critical shortage of affordable and safe housing, including long term options, temporary and transitional housing, and emergency housing and shelters for women experiencing violence.

While we welcome the recommendation to significantly expanding crisis and transitional housing by up to 1,000 new places to support at-risk people, we don't believe this is enough crisis housing.

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That said, we do acknowledge that the investment in crisis accommodation will be effective if it is delivered in conjunction with a new supply of social housing.

More specifically, McAuley Community Services for Women recommends that funding is set aside to Fund additional crisis accommodation facilities for women and their children, which includes 50 additional beds per night, with support, in Victoria.

The additional crisis beds should be modelled on McAuley Community Services for Women's 24/7 crisis accommodation and support model which is an effective, value for money alternative to motels.

Currently due to inadequate crisis accommodation facilities, the primary response to women and children in crisis is to place them in motel accommodation. The outcomes of this response are poor, with research showing that between 37 - 50% of women and children leaving the motel are returning home to a violent partner (QLD Gov. 2015).

Lack of access to a range of safe and affordable housing options is a critical factor in women either staying in violent relationships or becoming homeless when they leave.

We congratulate Infrastructure Victoria for recommending investment into the provision of social and affordable housing.

Family violence is the main reason why women, children and young people seek support from homelessness services. Without additional supply of safe and affordable housing options, in all forms, the family violence crisis will go unaddressed.

We note that a recent study by Australian Justice Equality Rights Access (JERA), revealed that among the top four issues for Australian women was a critical shortage of affordable, appropriate and safe housing (including emergency housing and shelters) for women experiencing violence. (<http://jerainternational.org/>)

In keeping with other published data, McAuley Community Services for Women data shows a high prevalence of mental illness in women who have experienced family violence (around 40-60%). Women with chronic mental and physical illnesses, resulting from years of abuse often express a preference for supported housing (short to medium term) rather than have the additional pressure of establishing new permanent housing during this traumatic period.

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For women assessed as low-risk from ongoing violence, and who choose not to enter a high security refuge, supported accommodation facilities can provide a critical place of recovery and rebuilding while legal, financial and other supports are being put in place. (Parcell & Moutou, 2014).

Recommendation: We believe that supported accommodation should be a part of this strategy, with the best practice current example of McAuley House, a 24/7 accommodation and support hub for women who are homeless.

Specifically, we recommend:

Investment in short term (6-12 month) supported housing, transitional housing, long-term public and community housing is needed. New supported housing is required. Access to afterhours and week-end support when needed, inclusive of respite accommodation. Elements of effective supported housing models include:

- Accommodation, either communal or dispersed housing
- Meals or self-catering facilities
- Support inclusive of case management; peer; social and recreational; educational and employment related.
- Various housing options need to be matched with appropriate support models (including longer term) in order to prevent recurrence of violence and homelessness.
- Investment in post-crisis support programs required for those women needing ongoing support after their return.

Rental assistance, public housing

Recommendations to expand rental assistance programs and replacing/ improving current public housing are welcomed. While public housing is not generally safe or the preferred option for single, older women, these recommendations will make a difference to older people who are on wait lists.

Homelessness, affordable housing and older women

The Time of our Lives (2016) showed that half a million older Australian women are living in long-term income poverty, and called for urgent affordable seniors' housing. While we support mainly women aged between 45 and 54, there is growing evidence of older women requiring services such as the one McAuley offers. The

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study, commissioned by Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation, also reflects our experience that a "complex mix of circumstances" act to discriminate against women, including the casualisation of the workforce, the superannuation system, and family violence.

Removing planning barriers for affordable housing and introducing inclusionary zoning

Both these recommendations are welcomed. Despite promises for land owned by the State Government to be made available for social housing, this has not happened enough in the past. Measures that simplify or remove planning barriers are critical.

Providing the private sector with incentives to invest in property

This again is a welcome step. As part of our plan to build our portfolio of property, we are looking to partner with the private sector. Any incentives that can be put in place to invest in property are to be welcomed.

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