

**REF: SUBMISSION TO VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT 10 YEAR SOCIAL AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING STRATEGY CONSULTATIONS**

07 April 2021

Homes Victoria  
Department of Health and Human Services  
Department of Families, Fairness and Housing  
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Dear Homes Victoria,

Thank-you for committing to consult with the community and relevant organisations in the sector regarding the Victorian Government's *10 Year Social and Affordable Housing Strategy*. We welcome the invitation to make this submission and commend the Victorian Government for not only recognising that a lack of social and affordable housing is a critical issue for many Victorian individuals and indeed the community as a whole, but furthermore, for developing a strategy to address these challenges and build a better housing system for all. We support the *Strategy's* vision for 'all Victorians to have access to a safe, affordable and appropriate home.' In this submission we call for greater investment into public housing in order to achieve this vision.

I am the Executive Officer of Community Information & Support Victoria (CISVic), the peak body representing 55 local community information and support services, across 64 sites in Victoria. We are also the lead agency in a consortium of 29 local centres delivering federally funded Emergency Relief under contracts. In the year 2019-2020 we distributed over \$2.8 million in emergency relief to community members from 34 sites. Services provided by our member agencies include: material aid, food, information, advocacy, referral, case management, budgeting assistance, financial counselling, No Interest Loans, and personal counselling. Each year we have contact with around 500,000 Victorians and we are very often the 'first port of call' for people seeking assistance.

As a peak body representing these agencies, CISVic is informed of collective issues facing the community members that agencies see every day. The housing challenges highlighted in the *Discussion Paper*, are ones that we are very familiar with and it is heartening to see them formally recognised by the Victorian Government. We have long advocated for greater investment into social housing, particularly public housing, along with a strong focus on homelessness prevention and early intervention. I understand that this consultation process calls on input into both social (public and community) and affordable housing, however, given our experiences with community members, the focus of this submission will be on public housing. We would like to comment on the following questions asked in the *Discussion Paper*:

1. What actions will enable people to access social housing, sustain their tenancies, and move between different housing options as their needs change?
2. What actions will strengthen social and affordable housing communities?

3. How do we strengthen our partnership approach to build a stronger and more effective social and affordable housing system?

## Make significant investments into public housing

This section responds to the question: **What actions will enable people to access social housing, sustain their tenancies, and move between different housing options as their needs change?**

This section discusses both systemic and individual supports. Recommendations for systemic support include increasing the supply of public housing, buying apartments in oversupply to facilitate a Housing First approach, keeping housing prices to a maximum of 30 per cent of the Centrelink income, situating houses near transport, shops, jobs, services and schools, and maintaining public housing that is of high quality. Recommendations for individual support include the incorporation of 'universal design' principles in all new builds ensuring minimum standards for people with disabilities, holistic, concentrated support for survivors of family violence, and tailored support for long term homeless people and people with mental health and drug use issues, including help with daily living skills and tasks.

### Systemic support

In order to enable people to access social housing, CISVic's main recommendation is to increase Victoria's supply of public housing. Our agencies work with community members who are on public housing waiting lists for years and are in a constant state of crisis because of this. For many people, paying rent takes up much of their income leaving them with little, if anything, to spend on utilities, food, car and transport costs, and education. People come to our agencies seeking food relief, help with rising school costs, car registration fees and Myki Day Passes. With more public housing, these community members will be housed quicker, relieving the pressure on individuals and allowing them to meet other necessary living costs. This then creates a pathway out of crisis.

*One of our agencies described a single mother who receives \$2000 a month in income and pays \$1300 a month in rent, leaving her with \$700 a month for other costs. The mother has multiple sclerosis and is a victim-survivor of family violence. She called the service in need of financial support after paying school costs for her two children, which on top of paying rent, left her without any money for food.*

This is one case of many and illustrates the dire need for more social and affordable housing. We advocate that a substantial portion of social housing is made up of state-built and state-managed public housing not only because this is cheaper for the

government in the long run, but also because this ensures that housing-related human rights are protected.<sup>1</sup>

CISVic recommends a substantial increase in resourcing for homelessness and housing support agencies. Too often these services are unable to meet the demand and our member agencies do their best to assist people who are homeless or at risk of losing their housing. Some of our member agencies have set up dedicated housing support programs with funding from a range of sources. From their reports they are able to assist the most when they have discretionary brokerage funding to meet people's needs – and without the barrier of restrictive eligibility criteria such as post code. Some of our agencies set up specialised programs in the pandemic such as for food, laundry and showering. CISVic would be happy to connect Homes Victoria with these agencies, to draw on their expertise.

In addition, CISVic supports a Housing First approach where people are housed first and then provided with the support to address any other complex challenges they may be facing. This is because we recognise that stable accommodation is the foundation for survival and social participation. It is our specific suggestion that the Victorian Government investigates the option of buying apartments that are currently in oversupply in the market for medium and longer term supported Housing First accommodation. This recommendation addresses both how people can access social housing, but also how they can sustain tenancies, removing conditions that limit people's access to accommodation such as personal challenges with drugs, alcohol, or mental illness.

In order for people to sustain tenancies, housing costs should be kept to 30 per cent of the Centrelink income (a common definition of housing affordability), housing must be built near transport, shops, jobs, services and schools, and social housing must be built and kept to a high standard. This includes energy efficient homes, and homes that are safe, and sustainable. The new Renter's Right will also assist people to stay in properties longer, and we commend the Victorian Government's efforts to enable people to establish a secure home base while renting.

### Individual support

Housing support must be tailored to individuals for people to sustain tenancies. In particular, victim-survivors of family violence need specialist housing support due to the myriad of complexities and barriers they face to be safe.

*One of our agencies described a victim-survivor who was a carer living with her widowed parent, however, the perpetrator located her, and she was forced to move. She lived in a women's refuge before being linked into a community housing service. She was housed far away from her parent and had to catch public transport to care for them multiple*

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<sup>1</sup> Per Capita **Submission to the Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia 5 Jul, 2020**

*times a week. Recently the perpetrator has found the victim survivor again and she has begun the long process of engaging with housing services to try and find a new place.*

Family violence victim-survivors are already dealing with multiple stressors and having safe housing is paramount to their wellbeing. Processes for family violence victim-survivors need to be simplified and prioritised. For this community member's safety, she needs to be relocated immediately, but our system does not have the capacity to provide this assistance.

Another recommendation to support people in their tenancies includes designing homes according to universal design principles. A universal design home refers to homes that are designed to meet the needs of people of different ages and abilities. These homes limit the barriers people may face to live there, such as stairs or narrow hallways. Designing homes to be universally accessible reduces the discrimination that many people face when looking for appropriate homes. Having more homes that are generally suitable for everyone, means that people with different levels of ability and disability face less waiting time for a place to live.

Finally, people who have been homeless for a long time, perhaps from their teenage years, and who may have drug use or mental health issues, require dedicated tailored support to maintain secure housing. This may include help navigating complex systems and bureaucracies, as well as help with daily living skills and tasks.

## Foster empowerment and community pride

This section responds to the question: **What actions will strengthen social and affordable housing communities?**

It addresses the funding of community development, utilising a grassroots empowerment approach and exploring co-housing.

Community development, empowerment and co-housing approaches are all centred around developing shared spaces to instil pride and connection in community members. Shared facilities and places such as parks, community gardens and recreation centres help foster connection, growth and a sense of home ownership that empowers people. Community development workers are integral to strengthening communities. Empowerment is born through community developed and led projects that involve the whole community, bringing people together for a common goal and creating something that will benefit others. This fosters a sense of belonging while encouraging communal responses to problems people are facing. Co-housing builds upon these concepts as by definition co-housing is a group of houses built around shared facilities such as a common house with a kitchen, dining room and laundry facilities. When connections are nurtured, stigma surrounding poverty and public housing is reduced because people have strong ties to one another, support each other and people can maintain dignity through high quality shared spaces where everyone belongs.

Community pride in the place of living is also furthered when there is enough social, public and affordable housing for all. In contrast, when such housing is scarce social housing is allocated to

those in highest needs and, as we know from experience in Victoria and elsewhere, it then becomes marginal and stigmatised.

## Connect with direct service providers and activist groups

This section responds to the question: **How do we strengthen our partnership approach to build a stronger and more effective social and affordable housing system?**

We suggest the Victorian Government forms partnerships with housing support providers, including selected CIVic members, housing advocacy groups, and that it proactively consults with both service providers and service users. We also suggest lobbying the federal government to permanently increase JobSeeker by \$75 a week as a matter of urgency.

As a peak body, CISVic is in regular contact with organisations on the front line helping people in housing crisis. We would welcome the opportunity to connect Homes Victoria and the Victorian Government with these organisations so that they could share their front line intelligence to secure stable and suitable housing for all into the future.

As a peak body that liaises with many advocacy and working groups, we also recommend developing partnerships with grassroots movements that understand local communities and local issues. Homelessness, family violence and disability organisations should be involved in this housing strategy. One of our member agencies, Council of Single Mothers and their Children would be an important organisation to consult or partner with. Housing advocacy groups would also provide fruitful collaboration, such as Friends of Public Housing and Housing for the Aged Group. Groups like these are often made up of people with lived experience are passionate about improving the housing system. Proactive consultation is certainly needed, and we welcome the Homes Victoria survey.

Finally, we encourage the Victorian Government to lobby the Australian Government to permanently increase the JobSeeker wage by \$75 a week. With the recent drop in the JobSeeker rate by \$100 a week, tens of thousands of people who have never experienced financial hardship before will be plunged into desperate poverty and homelessness. There simply are not enough affordable rental properties, or social housing, to house everyone.

Thank-you for your attention to the matters raised in this submission. Should you wish to discuss any of them, please do not hesitate to contact me on 0407 670 125 or at [kate@cisvic.org.au](mailto:kate@cisvic.org.au).

Yours sincerely,



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