



CENTRE FOR  
Women's Safety  
and Wellbeing

# HOUSING WOMEN AND CHILDREN ESCAPING DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE

## ROUNDTABLE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

OCTOBER 2022



## Acknowledgement of Country

The Centre for Women's Safety and Wellbeing acknowledges the Whadjuk Nyoongar people as the Traditional Owners of the land where our office is located. We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation, and we pay respect to Elders past and present. We acknowledge the continued deep spiritual attachment and relationship of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to this country and commit ourselves to the ongoing journey of reconciliation.

## Recognition of Victims and Survivors

The Centre for Women's Safety and Wellbeing recognises the strength and resilience of adults, children, and young people who have experienced domestic, family, and sexual violence and acknowledge that it is essential that responses to domestic, family, and sexual violence are informed by their expert knowledge and advocacy.

We pay respect to those who did not survive and acknowledge friends and family members who have lost loved ones to the preventable and far-reaching issue of domestic, family, and sexual violence.

## NAOMI - Survivor

I don't know what I would have done if my aunty and uncle didn't let me and my son stay in their investment property. I was totally demolished by all the abuse. I could hardly get up in the morning. I was barely surviving. And the abuse didn't stop when I left. You need time and space to recover. And you're so disconnected and isolated when you're living with the abuser – he makes sure that you are - that you need a stable home and the supports to get back into work and connect with your community. I don't think it's possible to break free from abuse and rebuild your life and a life for your kids without a stable home. I don't know how other women do it.





## Introduction

The Centre for Women's Safety and Wellbeing (CWSW) is the leading voice for women and children affected by gender-based violence in Western Australia. CWSW is an independent organisation and the peak representative body for women's specialist domestic and family violence, community-based women's health, and sexual assault services in Western Australia. CWSW works with governments, peak bodies, community, and private organisations to prevent violence against women, promote women's health, advance gender equity, and to ensure that women's voices are integral to policy, legislation, and services. CWSW takes an intersectional approach that recognises the multiple forms of discrimination many women face, so that responses to these issues address the particular and diverse needs of women.


The Centre for Women's Safety and Wellbeing seeks to promote awareness of the causes and effects of domestic and family violence. Sadly, homelessness is one of the consequences and outcomes of domestic and family violence when housing choices are not available or accessible. Whilst the support offered to women and children affected by domestic and family violence is working well in many areas in terms of crisis support, an effective service response is severely impacted by the scarcity of appropriate, safe, affordable, and sustainable housing needed to achieve long-term positive outcomes. CWSW believes that victim-survivors have a right to a safe, affordable, and appropriate home, and that the Western Australian Government has a responsibility to realise this possibility.

Safe, accessible, and affordable housing options – from refuges to permanent housing – are critical to any domestic and family violence response strategy. The most effective housing solutions for women to secure housing stability, maintain safety from further domestic and family violence, and receive trauma-informed supports to assist recovery remain unclear. CWSW advocates for the creation of a robust and integrated housing pathway for women and children seeking to leave perpetrators of domestic and family violence.

## Roundtable to discuss housing for women and children escaping family and domestic violence

On September 12<sup>th</sup>, domestic and family violence and community service representatives met with the Hon. Simone McGurk MLA, Minister for Child Protection; Women's Interests; Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence; Community Services and the Hon. John Carey MLA, Minister for Housing; Lands; Homelessness; Local Government to discuss the critical issue of housing for women and children seeking to leave a perpetrator of domestic and family violence.


Roundtable participants heard that the WA Labor Government has worked to alleviate the pressure on the social housing system and to support the safety of women and children



experiencing domestic and family violence. This includes Safe at Home, the Rapid Rehousing Pilot, mobile outreach funding, and flexible payment packages. The WA Government is also working to secure new social housing, through timber frame builds, modular homes, and spot purchasing. They are also supporting the community housing sector to grow their housing base through a range of avenues including direct grants and policy reform.

### Key themes identified

- Whilst the experiences of women and children experiencing homelessness as a result of domestic and family violence are diverse, the impact of homelessness is undeniably significant and ongoing.
- Very few women exiting refuges move into stable, long-term, appropriate accommodation due to a lack or absence of suitable housing. Women and children are living in improvised dwellings, with no tenure plan or are in short-term temporary accommodation. Service providers report that many women will often decide to return to an abusive partner due to absence of money, family and/or financial support and stable housing.
- Overall, the current system is not working effectively. An absence of appropriate exit accommodation means that SHS assistance is not able to function as a mechanism for moving women and children escaping domestic and family violence along a housing pathway.
- Private rental subsidies as a way to achieve long-term housing outcomes is problematic as this is not an option for many women experiencing homelessness due to barriers such as affordable rental supply, competition, and inadequate income support.
- The importance of continued funding for mobile outreach was emphasised as a critical form of support for women and children who remain living with a perpetrator of violence due to the lack of available housing or have exited a refuge and are living in other various forms of housing and accommodation.
- It was stressed that acute shortages in crisis, transitional, and long-term housing (particularly in regional areas) means that Aboriginal women often experience repeated abuse and further periods of homelessness.
- The absence of transitional housing as a component of the Social Housing Strategy was noted by participants as a concern – especially with the move towards Housing First – as for specific cohorts, such as victim-survivors of domestic and family violence, transitional housing is an important part of the housing continuum and we




need to ensure transitional housing stock for domestic and family violence in particular is not lost and new transitional housing is added to social housing provided by Community Housing Providers as needed.

- Whilst some services offer supported accommodation, services report that they are forced to limit the number of women they take on temporary visas because they are not adequately funded to provide places. This issue is further compounded by the absence of housing options for women on temporary visas outside of the private rental market. It was acknowledged that creating more sustainable and suitable housing options for this cohort of women and their dependents will require a concerted effort across a number of different policy areas including migration, housing, domestic and family violence, and income support.
- There was a focus on how the experience of CALD victim-survivors of domestic and family violence is shaped by their unique experiences as members of CALD communities. Participants mentioned the lack of safe and suitable housing and transitional options for CALD women, in particular who for cultural reasons, crisis accommodation is not always suitable. This often leads to many women continuing to live with the perpetrator of violence.
- The absence of a well-developed evidence-based service model for the two years post-separation – the most dangerous period in terms of perpetrator risk to women and children’s safety – was highlighted. There was strong interest in a service model that featured transitional housing. Systems of support are currently geared towards helping women leave abusive partners, even with the recognition that separation is a well-established risk factor for lethality for women and children. Many existing transitional housing options have short timeframes leaving many women with limited to no exit pathways once their transitional housing program has ended. Understanding specific tactics of post-separation abuse is crucial to designing interventions that acknowledge experiences in negotiating violence, and the structural contexts that are barriers to safety and recovery/re-establishment.
- Roundtable participants spoke about the lack of interventions to promote healing, safety, and well-being. Separation from an abusive partner was identified as an ongoing process or transition that requires specific interventions attached to housing.

### Key recommendations:

1. Increase support for victim-survivors to safely stay in their homes after leaving a perpetrator of domestic and family violence



Participants agreed that wherever possible, victim-survivors should be supported to stay in their homes after leaving the perpetrator of domestic and family violence, rather than facing all the disadvantages of having to find another home to be safe. Flexible financial support and legal assistance is critical, as is access to education and employment opportunities. Programs that support these outcomes need to be guaranteed long-term to embed a coordinated 'safe at home' approach into Western Australia's domestic and family violence response.

## 2. Resource specialist domestic and family violence services to deliver mobile outreach services to support victim-survivors continuing to live in the same home as the perpetrator of domestic and family violence

Mobile outreach is a particularly critical service to support women and children's safety during the current housing crisis. Outreach in service structures means the strategic or structural approach to creating access for women to multiple sources of help and support.

Mobile outreach allows flexibility and a significant degree of agility to respond and act as reasonably close to needs and issues as possible. Funding agreements must allow sufficient "give" to enable a high degree of responsiveness, and longevity to that responsiveness. Key features would include:

- Accessible services based in communities, staffed by people who are specialists in domestic and family violence;
- Developing links to support and maintaining connections;
- Service users defining their own needs rather than provision being 'service led'; and
- Active support in the community.

By its very nature, domestic and family violence can isolate women and children and disrupt their connections to family and others. At a basic and everyday level, outreach practices can be described as various actions and activities to enable contact and communication with women and vice versa, and can be critical to women and children becoming safer.

## 3. Increase the availability of immediate and long-term housing options for women leaving perpetrators of violence in order to cater for the diverse needs of victim-survivors

This needs to include crisis accommodation, rental assistance, affordable rental housing, and "Safe at home" programs. Victim-survivors also need more consistent support to attain their preferred housing, whether this is to remain in their home, access private rentals, or apply for social housing.



4. Support victim-survivors to access private rental properties

Rising costs of living and a highly competitive market have caused the rental market to become inaccessible and unaffordable to many. There was strong support for investment in programs that support victim-survivors to obtain a private rental, or maintain an existing private rental property, without falling below the poverty line.

Roundtable participants acknowledged the Government's investment in the Rapid Rehousing Pilot, which allows domestic and family violence victim-survivors to receive rental assistance and support services for a period of time. After the rental assistance ends, the victim-survivor can stay in the rental if they can pay the rent on their own. Participants were keen to see this 'scaled up' as soon as possible.

5. Develop strengthened referral pathways and education and training for frontline professionals working in specialist homelessness and social housing sectors, and private real estate sector

The training must support professionals to identify domestic and family violence, refer to appropriate services, and support victim-survivors in accessing and/or sustaining safe and secure tenancies.

6. Invest in the development of more new social housing properties specifically to provide support for victim-survivors of domestic and family violence


With tenancy vacancy rates so low and rental prices so high and ongoing need for affordable rental housing for victim-survivors, there was discussion regarding a proportion of new social housing properties being set aside for victim-survivors and the importance of this being explicit and purposeful in the state's social housing strategy.

7. Develop a transitional housing service model tailored to victim-survivors for the two years post-separation

There was very strong support amongst participants for supportive services with incorporated transitional housing for up to two years, allowing victim-survivors to work toward their housing pathway of choice. The service model could include legal and economic advocacy, educational, employment, and therapeutic supports. Post-separation abuse is a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon that requires differential social, legal, and housing systems responses to support the safety and well-being of victim-survivors and their children.

8. Develop a housing strategy that supports the supply of suitable housing for women and children escaping domestic and family violence





It is critical to the growing number of people experiencing homelessness as a result of domestic and family violence that the quantity, location, and timing of the supply of new housing in the context of domestic and family violence is considered as a priority within strategic housing planning.

9. Embed an intersectional approach into WA's housing strategy to ensure that victim-survivors who experience discrimination have access to specific support and housing services

As part of an intersectional response, it is important to consider removing the permanent residency or Australian citizenship requirements (for victim-survivors of domestic and family violence) from the eligibility criteria for social housing, and for rental assistance products and subsidies.

Specific and customised housing support and resources for CALD women experiencing domestic and family violence is also required. It is important to provide culturally tailored approaches to case management and advocacy for CALD women experiencing domestic and family violence.

10. Invest in the capability to gather state-wide data to map the housing needs of women and children escaping domestic and family violence to housing supply

Whilst data on the number of women experiencing homelessness resulting from domestic and family violence is well documented, and the requirement for additional social housing cannot be disputed, research, data, and literature often focus on the point in time of leaving the person using violence. Data is needed on women's journeys between different points in the housing system, and the long-term outcomes for women accessing housing products/services. This will ensure that policy relating to housing options will better translate into a strong evidence-based strategy.

11. Invest in local placed-based initiatives that provide adequate resources and autonomy to Aboriginal communities to decide on the types of properties, location, and support models they require.

Planning for diversity of housing by understanding people's living arrangements and the types and locations of housing in Western Australia is crucial to meeting the needs of Aboriginal women and their children.