

Introduction

The Australian Services Union Victorian and Tasmanian Authorities and Services Branch (ASU) represents approximately 25,000 members across Victoria and Tasmania. The ASU represents members in the social and community services sector, including in specialist housing and homelessness services, alcohol and other drugs supports, psychosocial mental health work and family violence services, among many others. The ASU is also the representative union for local government workers, as well as in energy, water and various public authorities. For more information, see www.asuvictas.com.au

Members of the Australian Services Union who work for specialist housing and homelessness services provide a vital service to some of the most vulnerable Victorians every day. This work is specialised, increasingly complex in nature and ultimately lifesaving. Indeed, these services have been deemed an essential service under recent state of emergency laws. ASU members and organisers have a perspective on and understanding of homelessness and housing issues in Victoria that is both unique and poorly understood outside the sector. Workers in specialist homelessness services are not only required to have a deep understanding of the practical issues required to assist their clients to receive housing services, but also an understanding of the reason their clients are homeless. This means that specialist homelessness service workers need to have an understanding of and have the capacity to deal with issues as diverse as mental health challenges, family violence and alcohol and other drugs.

For these reasons, the ASU requests that the committee includes ASU representatives in upcoming hearings before the close of this inquiry. This can be arranged by contacting our Policy and Research Officer Kat Hardy via khardy@asuvictas.com.au or 0416 729 069

What is needed

To state our position simply - it is not sufficient to build more housing stock, no matter how much, if you do not have a professional, qualified, securely employed set of

housing and homelessness workers and wraparound services in place. Placing vulnerable Victorians into housing without adequate levels of social support increases the likelihood of tenancies being unsustainable or breaking down, with an increased risk of entering or repeating a cycle of homelessness. On a macro level, this may also serve to turn community opinion against social and public housing entirely.

We are also of the view that the discussion around workforce and job creation in relation to housing should take a wider view than simply those workers who would be brought on in a short-term capacity to construct more units. The social and community services sector is a female-dominated industry that is poorly remunerated in comparison to similarly qualified occupations in other sectors, with most staff in specialist homelessness services now recruited having at least an undergraduate qualification.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the essential services provided by the homelessness sector for the most vulnerable, the wider community and the invaluable work provided each day by frontline staff as first responders in this public health crisis. Funding more secure and fairly-paid jobs in this sector would have beneficial flow-on effects for the whole community. With ABS data highlighting just this week that women have lost jobs at four times the rate of men in July as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic¹, we cannot simply build our way out of this crisis. Increasing the numbers of secure, fairly paid jobs in this sector would not only provide vital support for some of our most vulnerable community members, it could serve to increase secure job opportunities for women when they are so desperately needed.

Given the well-established importance of these workers, we do not believe the current level of funding provided to the sector is adequate to properly support public and social housing residents, let alone to support a much-needed increase in the number of housing places. It is of great concern to the ASU that the widely held view across the sector is that state government funding for

¹ <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/calls-for-female-focused-budget-as-women-face-financial-gender-disaster-20200815-p55m0e.html?fbclid=IwAR2Xd7Hpvuu8RbszfBHWlwOxOSOJA3Xn3L5xydKkLFmF-HpEKK2XqrlR2yQ>

specialist homelessness services is much lower than for other comparable government-funded services. Indeed, it seems that there is up to a 32% variation in the lowest and highest input price for labour, or for full-time equivalent staff members (FTE), in a government service contract for specialist homelessness services as compared with the other comparable programs. The ASU has taken this concern up with the state government separately to this submission and has received an initial response indicating this matter is being examined.

Underfunding within specialist homelessness services makes it very difficult to attract and retain experienced staff as they seek work in more highly remunerated sections of the community services sector. High turnover is costly and wasteful for all concerned and disturbing when it arises from structural factors outside our member's control which are avoidable. The obvious flow-on effect of this turnover is the loss of experience and institutional knowledge in specialist homelessness services and a lack of continuity for the clients of these services. These services need equity of funding in comparison to the wider community sector, delivered via a long term, guaranteed and block funded mechanism that can provide both stability for clients and sufficient pay and professional opportunities for the workforce. ASU members contributing to this submission note that without secure and well-supported positions some housing workers are at risk of homelessness themselves.

The work carried out in housing and homelessness is increasingly complex, compounded by the impact of changes in other areas of the community sector, such as the implementation of the NDIS and cutting of community mental health. As service purchasers, governments do not play a sufficiently active role in ensuring that funded service providers adhere to industrial standards in their workplaces. In this instance, the impact is that some workers are being underpaid by way of being under classified for work that is increasingly complex, such as intensive care management roles with long term homeless populations.

Other aspects of funding arrangements to housing and homelessness service providers negatively impact workers. The length of funding cycles is driving an increasing amount of fixed-term and other insecure work in housing and homelessness, and indeed across the community sector. The ASU calls for longer funding lengths to mitigate this and firmer expectations being placed on providers employing workers to ensure that jobs are safe, secure and adhere to industrial standards. We note that the Productivity Commission has recommended seven-year funding cycle and that in some other jurisdictions, such as Queensland, five-year cycles have been committed to.

As another note regarding the importance of this inquiry, the ASU recently surveyed and consulted with our members working in family violence response, prevention, and related roles across the community sector. When asked to indicate what one key change would ease the pressure on services responding to family violence, 34.62% of respondents selected long term safe housing options, the most popular response.

In the words of one ASU member - "Without adequate long term housing and welfare options, people experiencing violence have nowhere to go, and no way to escape relationships, and short-term, stop-gap solutions won't solve the problem or benefit the people who need it most."

Lack of viable long-term housing options therefore has a direct impact on workers across the entire spectrum of housing and homelessness service system. ASU members report that the lack of housing options impacts on their capacity to perform their roles effectively and as designed. Further to that members report their own ongoing occupational health and safety concerns. This includes the compounding impacts of vicarious trauma from witnessing lack of housing and demand levels. Due to the roles that workers inevitably play turning away people experiencing homelessness from services, with the knowledge that this may be to return clients to sleeping rough scenarios, unsafe housing environments, family violence and other dangerous situations. The cumulative effect of workers witnessing demand exceed supply, feeling powerless and potentially complicit in a broken system leads to psychological harm, and some to leave the sector entirely.

ASU members particularly recognise the lack of affordable long-term housing options available to their clients and broader community. The diminished state and grossly inadequate volume of public housing in Victoria is a factor that regularly comes up in consultation with ASU members. Members working in housing and homelessness, family violence response and other areas regularly feedback to the union and others that public housing needs further investment and expansion to ensure that secure housing is available. Our members are keen to see this investment occur, with the right balance of wraparound services to ensure efforts to reduce and eliminate homelessness are successful and sustainable.

Members have fed back to the ASU that there are important distinctions to be made in the sustainability and quality of different long-term housing outcomes. Private rental as an outcome has met with varying success, particularly once rental subsidy periods are exhausted. Supply of private rental properties is highly variable, including on a regional basis versus metropolitan, and with other factors such as bushfire

impacted areas having no to very scarce availability. Public housing is more secure compared to social housing as a long-term housing option. And some members report that social housing is not an option for their clients due to higher rent calculations.

Housing outcomes need to be based on realistic expectations and need to be long term and ongoing. Members note this with experience of seeing the revolving door of unrealistic and unsustainable options, such as being involved in rehousing of residents from the Gatwick Hotel in St Kilda. Familiar faces keep popping up rather than sustainable solutions being identified and available at the outset. All these issues impact upon the sense of efficacy specialist homelessness workers have in performing their jobs, and occupational health and safety concerns in their roles, as described above.

Over the last 10 years, the Initial Assessment and Planning (IAP) work being undertaken has increasingly become actual case management because of a lack of vacancies and case-management vacancies in the sector. ASU members note that fragmentation within the housing and homelessness system is a huge problem and IAP services are not funded or resourced adequately to follow Opening Doors guidelines, both in terms of Housing Establishment Fund (HEF) availability and staffing levels. Similarly, members employed in crisis housing settings report the longer and longer stays of residents, due to an absence of housing options to move on to. This changes the nature of the work they can perform with service users.

Other solutions ASU members would like to see adopted include those listed below, these are covered in more detail in some other submission to the Inquiry.

Bridging Workers: there is a need for bridging workers to be co-located to ensure mainstream services are more equipped to understand and intervene early. Settings such as schools, hospital discharges, GP communities of practice, hospitals, should have positions within their systems to be housing workers to develop housing plans

Housing First: ASU members advocate for the adoption of the Housing First model, and in particular wraparound services.

Reconnect and other early intervention: that services and programs providing early intervention support to young people receive ongoing funding. Whilst Reconnect is federally funded, members would like to see advocacy from the state where funding uncertainty impacts on Victorian's access to services, and their employment.

COVID-Specific Issues

In discussing this submission ASU members raised several issues specific to the pandemic. They highlight issues of workloads and inequity and include inconsistent application of service provision guidelines.

The Homelessness Emergency Accommodation Response Teams (HEART) program, whilst meeting very immediate and pressing need, has created other issues for workforce, and recipients of support from other homelessness programs. ASU members report that at times they are forced to argue with other agencies to have emergency accommodation extended for their HEART referrals at one organisation, because a second organisation involved are applying non-pandemic IAP expectations to clients, and referrals are going missing. HEART program and motel response are operating with no funding for extra workers, resulting in additional workload as the HEART response is provided and other workload is doubled up with existing client loads.

Support for other submissions

The ASU would like to express its support for the submissions from both the Victorian Trades Hall Council (VTHC) and the Council to Homeless Persons (CHP). In particular, the ASU supports the key recommendations of the VTHC submission regarding a right to shelter for Victorians, significantly increased investment into public and social housing and housing stock, and in particular guaranteed funding for social service providers and workers. We are also supportive of the detailed recommendations laid out by the CHP regarding the number and types of new social housing properties required, and regarding the other social policy, measures proposed that would prove key in reducing the numbers of Victorians who end up homeless and improving the situations of those who do.