

**Homelessness Green Paper Submissions  
PO Box 7442  
CANBERRA BC ACT 2610**

**RESPONSE FROM THE VICTORIAN WOMEN'S TRUST, June 30, 2008  
1/388 Bourke Street, Melbourne VIC 3000**

## **INTRODUCTION:**

We welcome the Federal Government's initiative reviewing the state of homelessness in Australia; the subsequent release of the Government's 'Green Paper'; and having this opportunity to potentially help contribute to future policy. The Government's review is timely and presents a unique opportunity to address the issue in a more holistic and cohesive way, importantly from a federal level.

As a twenty-three year-old philanthropic organisation dedicated to improving conditions for women and girls, the Victorian Women's Trust has experience in supporting projects addressing homelessness – such as funding 'Fitted for Work', an organisation committed to helping find employment for disadvantaged women in 2007/2008, and 'Urban Seed' (Collins Street Baptist Benevolent Society), funded to run homeless women's workshops, in 2006/07, just to name a couple of recent projects.

In its application for funding from the Trust, Urban Seed highlighted that homeless women are often 'invisible', tending not to congregate in areas associated with homelessness, due to public safety concerns.

In writing this submission, the Victorian Women's Trust urges the Government to ensure that homeless women are not 'invisible' in terms of the Government's response to the issue.

In particular, we hope the Government frames its policy response by identifying and addressing the complex needs of special target groups susceptible to homelessness – be they women, children, indigenous people, refugees or asylum seekers, people with disabilities, mental illness, or people exiting the criminal justice system.

**By identifying the special needs of the most susceptible groups, and by implementing wide-ranging policies with an emphasis on early intervention responses, we believe a great impact could be made in reducing homelessness.**

## **This response to the Government's Green Paper is set out in two parts:**

- (1) Following some background information about the Victorian Women's Trust, this paper will first look at important current issues faced by homeless people in Australia, with a particular emphasis on women and children.
- (2) The second part of our response endorses the submission of the Council to Homeless Persons (CHP), examining the challenges ahead and the recommendations made in relation to homeless women.

## **CURRENT ISSUES HOMELESS WOMEN FACE:**

In examining the plight of homeless women in Australia, we believe there are important points raised in the Government's Green Paper, as well as from other reputable organisations with expertise in homelessness – that we wish to highlight and which should be considered in developing future policy responses. By breaking down the needs of homeless women into special interest groups, especially those susceptible to homelessness, it becomes clear these needs are vast and varied and call for special attention.

### *Homeless women:*

- females make up 42 per cent of adults experiencing homelessness
- According to figures supplied by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission: *Women are significantly affected by homelessness. Just over 40% of the homeless population is female. However, homeless women are often less visible than men and the extent to which homelessness affects women is often underestimated. Homeless women tend to remain out of sight, away from areas where homeless people congregate for fear of violence, rape or other abuse*<sup>1</sup>.

### *Supported Accommodation Assistance Program:*

- 60% of those who used the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) services in 2005-06 were women. Children accompany many women).
- Each night 620 new people seek SAAP accommodation and almost 360 are turned away.
- Most SAAP services do not have the capacity or expertise to provide comprehensive disability services.

### *Women with disabilities:*

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<sup>1</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. (2008). *Homelessness is a human rights issue*. [http://www.hreoc.gov.au/Human\\_Rights/housing/homelessness\\_2008.html#5](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/Human_Rights/housing/homelessness_2008.html#5), accessed 20/6/08.

- Women with disabilities are one of the most vulnerable groups to the risk of homelessness due to a range of factors, including:
  - (i) women with disabilities are less likely to be in paid work than other women,
  - (ii) women with disabilities earn less than their male counterparts,
  - (iii) women with disabilities are often forced to live in situations in which they are vulnerable to violence, and are abused at a rate of at least two times greater than non-disabled women.<sup>2</sup>

These factors (which are unique to women with disabilities) are exacerbated by typical causes of homelessness such as lack of affordable housing, increase in unemployment and limited access to public housing. Despite the vulnerability of women with disabilities to the risk of homelessness, people with physical and intellectual disabilities are often excluded from homeless services and agencies that form part of the SAAP.

#### *Homeless women and children:*

- Children accompany many women (*p.20 Green Paper*).
- Over 50 per cent of those turned away from SAAP (accommodation) services are individuals with children (*p.36 Green Paper*)
- According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare: *females with children had the highest number of unmet needs [services were neither provided or referred], at 7,900 in 3,600 closed support periods (22% of total unmet needs)*<sup>3</sup>

#### *Pregnant Women:*

- According to a report released by the NSW Ombudsman, pregnant women are often excluded from accessing SAAP services and agencies. For instance, according to the findings of the Ombudsman's report: *five agency policies reviewed listed pregnancy as a reason for exclusion, some in all cases and others after a certain stage of pregnancy, or dependent on health status or vacancy of a downstairs room*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Women with Disabilities Australia. (2004). *Unjustified hardship: Homelessness and women with disabilities*. <http://www.wvda.org.au/housing04.htm>, accessed 13/6/08.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2007). *Homeless People in SAAP – Supported Accommodation Assistance Program National Data Collection Agency Annual Report 2005-06*, Cat. No. HOU 156, p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> New South Wales Ombudsman. (2004). *Final report: Assisting homeless people – the need to improve their access to accommodation and support services*. New South Wales Ombudsman: Sydney, p.56

- Given that domestic and family violence are the major reasons women approach homeless services for assistance (for example, 54% of females with children were seeking assistance from homeless services because of domestic violence in 2005-06<sup>5</sup>) and that pregnant women are particularly vulnerable to abuse, it is concerning that pregnant women are often excluded from accessing homeless services. For instance, approximately “59 per cent of women who [have] experienced violence by a previous partner were pregnant at some time during the relationship; of these, 36 per cent reported that violence occurred during a pregnancy and 17 per cent experienced violence for the first time when they were pregnant”<sup>6</sup>.

#### *Older Women:*

- Many individuals are vulnerable to homelessness around the period of retirement. For example, approximately 14% of Australia’s homeless population are aged 55 years or older<sup>7</sup>. The causes of homelessness among older persons include the lack of affordable housing that meet the needs of the elderly and lack of sufficient income (these could be associated with retirement from the workforce)<sup>8</sup>.

#### *Other marginalised groups:*

- People who are homeless are among the most marginalised people in Australia. Homelessness is one of the most important markers of social exclusion (*p13 Green Paper*). For instance, groups such as Indigenous people, people with mental illnesses, refugees and asylum seekers, children and young people, and women are significantly affected by homelessness<sup>9</sup>.

#### *Indigenous People:*

- Indigenous people are at greater risk of being affected by homelessness. “While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up 2% of Australia’s population, they represent 9% of total homeless population... Indigenous people in Australia face greater social and economic disadvantage than other sectors of the population.

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<sup>5</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2007). *Homeless People in SAAP – Supported Accommodation Assistance Program National Data Collection Agency Annual Report 2005-06*, Cat. No. HOU 156, p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> Carrington, K. (2003). *Domestic violence in Australia: An overview of the issues*. [http://www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/SP/Dom\\_Violence.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/SP/Dom_Violence.htm), accessed 13/6/08.

<sup>7</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2001). *Counting the homeless*, Cat. No. 2050.0. Australian Bureau of Statistics: Canberra.

<sup>8</sup> Australian Institute of Family Studies. (1999). Elderly homeless people. *Family Matters*, No. 52, p.41.

<sup>9</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. (2008). *Homelessness is a human rights issue*. [http://www.hreoc.gov.au/Human\\_Rights/housing/homelessness\\_2008.html#5](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/Human_Rights/housing/homelessness_2008.html#5), accessed 20/6/08.

Low levels of education and training, high levels of unemployment, persistent physical and mental health problems and substance addiction all contribute to the high levels of homelessness in Indigenous communities”<sup>10</sup>.

- Because Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience high levels of family violence (i.e., “Aboriginal women are more than 45 times more likely than non-Aboriginal women to be a victim of domestic violence”<sup>11</sup> and due to the fact that “family violence is the primary cause of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness”<sup>12</sup>, it would be logical to assume that women are over-represented in the population of homeless Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. For instance, 40% of Aboriginal people in homeless assistance services are women escaping domestic violence<sup>13</sup>

#### *People with mental illness:*

- Likewise, people with mental illness are disproportionately affected. “A large proportion of the homeless population is affected by mental illness... People with a mental illness often experience social isolation, [and] have difficulty accessing employment, education and support services...”<sup>14</sup>.

#### *Refugees and Asylum Seekers:*

- Refugees and asylum seekers are also a target group of being homeless. Many refugees and asylum seekers experience social and economic isolation and have difficulties establishing community networks and accessing support services<sup>15</sup>.

#### *Migrant women:*

- “Migrant and refugee women, especially those from non-English speaking backgrounds, are confronted” with a number of issues that

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<sup>10</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. (2008). *Homelessness is a human rights issue*. [http://www.hreoc.gov.au/Human\\_Rights/housing/homelessness\\_2008.html#5](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/Human_Rights/housing/homelessness_2008.html#5), accessed 20/6/08.

<sup>11</sup> University of Western Australia Crime Research Centre. (2004). *About domestic violence*. [http://www.crc.law.uwa.edu.au/publications/domestic\\_violence/domestic\\_violence\\_media\\_release/about\\_domestic\\_violence](http://www.crc.law.uwa.edu.au/publications/domestic_violence/domestic_violence_media_release/about_domestic_violence), accessed 20/8/06.

<sup>12</sup> Australian Federation of Homelessness Organisations. (2006). *Homelessness and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*. <http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/UserFiles/Indigenous%20Homelessness.pdf>, accessed 20/6/08.

<sup>13</sup> Australian Federation of Homelessness Organisations. (2006). *Homelessness and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*. <http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/UserFiles/Indigenous%20Homelessness.pdf>, accessed 20/6/08.

<sup>14</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. (2008). *Homelessness is a human rights issue*. [http://www.hreoc.gov.au/Human\\_Rights/housing/homelessness\\_2008.html#5](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/Human_Rights/housing/homelessness_2008.html#5), accessed 20/6/08.

<sup>15</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. (2008). *Homelessness is a human rights issue*. [http://www.hreoc.gov.au/Human\\_Rights/housing/homelessness\\_2008.html#5](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/Human_Rights/housing/homelessness_2008.html#5), accessed 20/6/08.

could contribute to and/or increase their risks of homelessness such as language difficulties, discriminatory practices in gaining employment and housing, family violence, lack of financial resources, lack of transport and lack of skills<sup>16</sup>.

#### *Children and Young People:*

- Children and young people are disproportionately affected by homelessness as almost half of all homeless persons are aged under 25<sup>17</sup>
- females represent 55% among homeless persons aged under 25<sup>18</sup>.
- The importance of early prevention and intervention strategies is reflected in the statistics on the number of young people who are homeless. For example, about 100,000 people are homeless in Australia; almost half of these people are under 25 years “with those aged 12-18 years a prominent group (26% of all homeless people)” and 10,000 are children<sup>19</sup>. Of those almost 50,000 homeless youths aged 25 years and under, 55% are female and 45% are male<sup>20</sup>.
- The factors associated with homelessness for those aged less than 25 years include:
  - unemployment and income of young people (decrease in full-time employment opportunities for young people and low income of under 25's);
  - family unemployment and income (financial stresses on families as a result of unemployment and low income – can create conflict);
  - early school leaving (a connection between early school leaving and youths becoming at risk of homelessness);
  - the earlier young people leave school, the more likely they are to remain homeless);
  - abuse and violence; family conflict;
  - changes in family structure (for example, separation of parents, changes to family – stepfamilies; i.e., young women from stepfamilies are more likely to leave home compared with young males)<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Lynch, P., and Otto, D. (2002). *UN Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing: Questionnaire on Women and Adequate Housing – An Australian Submission*. Public Interest Law Clearing House: Melbourne, p.29.

<sup>17</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. (2008). *Homelessness is a human rights issue*. [http://www.hreoc.gov.au/Human\\_Rights/housing/homelessness\\_2008.html#5](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/Human_Rights/housing/homelessness_2008.html#5), accessed 20/6/08.

<sup>18</sup> Chamberlain, C., and MacKenzie, D. (2002). *Youth homelessness 2001*. RMIT University: Melbourne, p.19.

<sup>19</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2001). *Counting the homeless*, Cat. No. 2050.0. Australian Bureau of Statistics: Canberra.

<sup>20</sup> Chamberlain, C., and MacKenzie, D. (2002). *Youth homelessness 2001*. RMIT University: Melbourne, p.19.

<sup>21</sup> Crane, P., and Brannock, J. (1996). *Homelessness among young people in Australia: Early intervention and prevention*. National Clearinghouse for Youth Studies: Hobart, pp. 8-12.

- Experiencing homelessness as a child makes adult homelessness more likely (*p8 Green Paper*).