

Yoorrook – *Nutrher-mooyoop* on housing and homelessness

Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency

January 2024



VACCA
Connected by culture

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VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL
CHILD CARE AGENCY

Acknowledgment

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands across Victoria that we work on, and pay our respects to their Elders, both past and present and to their children and young people, who are our future Elders and caretakers of this great land. We acknowledge the Stolen Generations, those who we have lost; those who generously share their stories with us; and those we are yet to bring home.

Note on Language

- We use the term Aboriginal to describe the many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Clans and Traditional Owner Groups whose traditional lands comprise what is now called Australia.
- We use the term Indigenous as it relates to Indigenous peoples globally as well as in the human rights context.
- The terms First Peoples and First Nations are employed in the Australian context, by recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the First Peoples/First Nations of this land, it directly relates to their inherent un-ceded sovereignty.

Note on case stories shared

All case stories shared have been de-identified, but due to the high-profile nature of some of these cases, and the relatively small and connected Aboriginal community in Victoria, we ask that these submissions are redacted if this submission is published publicly, as we do not want to cause further harm to families that are already suffering.

Contact

For all enquiries relating to this Submission please contact the Office of the CEO at: vacca@vacca.org

About VACCA

Established in December 1976, the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (VACCA) is the lead Aboriginal child and family support organisation in Australia and the largest provider of Aboriginal family violence, justice support and homelessness services in Victoria. We work holistically with children, young people, women, men, and families to ensure they have the necessary supports to

heal and thrive. We do this by advocating for the rights of children and providing everyone who walks through our doors with services premised on human rights, self-determination, cultural respect and safety.

We provide support services to over 4,500 children and young people, and their families and carers each year. VACCA provides support services for Stolen Generations through Link-Up Victoria, which has been in operation since 1990. Link-Up Victoria provides family research, family tracing and reunion services to the Stolen Generations survivors to reunite them with their families, communities, traditional country and culture.

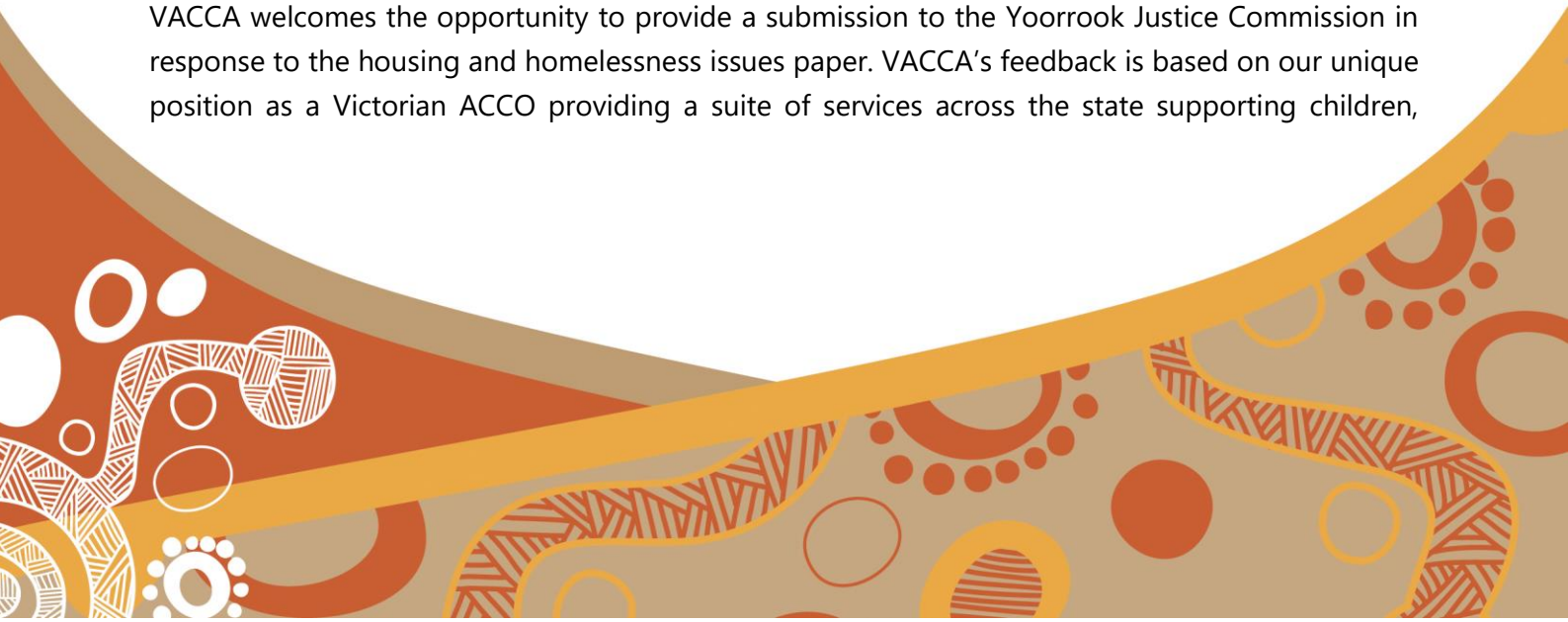
VACCA shows respect for observance of and compliance with Aboriginal cultural protocols, practice and ceremony. VACCA emerged from a long and determined Aboriginal Civil Rights movement in Victoria. Today, we continue to act, serve and lobby for the rights of Aboriginal Victorians, especially children, women and families.

While VACCA is a statewide service provider, we operate primarily in metropolitan Melbourne, Inner Gippsland and the Ovens Murray regions. Across our six regions, we deliver over 80 programs tailored to the needs of the communities we serve including child and family services, child protection, family violence and sexual assault supports, youth and adult justice supports, early years, education, homelessness, disability, AOD, cultural programs and supports for Stolen Generations. We employ over 1000 staff, making us one of Victoria's biggest employers of Aboriginal people. Our Aboriginality distinguishes us from mainstream services and enables us to deliver the positive outcomes we achieve for our people.

VACCA is guided by Cultural Therapeutic Ways, our whole-of-agency approach to our practice of healing for Aboriginal children, young people, families, community members and carers who use our services, and to ensure that VACCA is a safe and supportive workplace for staff. The framework acts at the intersection of cultural practice with trauma and self-determination theories. The aim of Cultural Therapeutic Ways is to integrate Aboriginal culture and healing practices across the organisation and guide our service delivery approach to be healing, protective and connective.

Introduction

VACCA welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Yoorrook Justice Commission in response to the housing and homelessness issues paper. VACCA's feedback is based on our unique position as a Victorian ACCO providing a suite of services across the state supporting children,



young people, families and community members. We have protected and promoted the rights of Aboriginal children and families for over 40 years. VACCA believes that all children have a right to feel and be safe and live in an environment that is free from abuse, neglect, and violence. We are committed to promoting and upholding the rights of Aboriginal children to maintain and celebrate their identity and culture, recognising that connection to culture is critical for children's emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing.

Whilst Aboriginal peoples have demonstrated decades of resilience and strength, their healing journey is severely disrupted when there is no safe, affordable housing available to meet their needs and they are faced with significant financial hardship and poverty as a consequence. Access to safe, secure, and affordable housing is a central pillar underpinning every area of life. The current lack of housing options continuously undermines the progress of VACCA's clients and operates as a key barrier in the delivery of VACCA programs. Whilst it has always been difficult to access affordable, safe and long-term housing, the combined factors of the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of interest rates and the rising population has driven Victoria into a housing crisis, which is particularly acute for Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal peoples experience very high rates of homelessness and housing stress compared to the broader population, in Victoria Aboriginal people make up 0.8 per cent of the population, but 10.2 per cent of homelessness's service users.¹ These contemporary experiences of housing insecurity and homelessness cannot be decoupled from the historical displacement of Aboriginal community which occurred during colonisation, which resulted in the taking of lands and the detachment from home and Country. Both research and VACCA's experiences as a child welfare organisation highlight the impact that inadequate housing and homelessness has on the Aboriginal community, in particular Aboriginal young people, Elders, family violence survivors, people with disability, out-of-home care leavers and those exiting youth and adult prison.

VACCA's submission takes a right-based approach centred in Aboriginal self-determination, to respond to the issues paper and make recommendations for reforms and investment to respond to the current and historical housing and homelessness crisis.

¹ Council for Homeless Persons, *Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Homelessness*, 2022, retrieved from: [weblink](#).

Summary of recommendations

1. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission calls on the Victorian Government to resource ACCOs to respond to barriers facing prospective Aboriginal homeowners including expanding knowledge and education strategies on how to enter the home ownership market.
2. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission calls on the Victorian Government to partner with the ACCO sector and undertake the development of new and innovative shared equity schemes and rent-to-buy initiatives for Aboriginal Victorians to expand access to home ownership.
3. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission calls on the Victorian Government to extend the Big Housing Build, increasing the assigned percentage of housing for Aboriginal households from 10 per cent to 25 percent over the next 5 years, to redress stolen land and meet actual projected demand in population growth.
4. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission calls on the Victorian Government commit to providing \$7.6 million per annum to the 'More than a Landlord' program and \$10.5 million per annum to extend the 'Aboriginal Private Rental Assistance Program' with statewide coverage, as called for by the Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Forum.
5. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call on the Victorian Government to build 5000+ social housing properties by 2036 (300 houses per annum) to meet future social housing demand, as called for by the Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework.
6. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission calls on the Victorian Government to address the needs of Aboriginal young people exiting out-of-home care, including investment in ACCOs to provide wrap around supports so young people leaving care can attain culturally safe, secure, affordable and long-term housing, as well as additional supports required to assist them to maintain their tenancy.
7. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission calls on the Victorian Government to expand the availability of Aboriginal led transitional and crisis accommodation and support services that cater to the needs of the following cohorts:
 - Aboriginal people escaping family violence, including women, men, children and, elders and LGBTQIA+ community.

- **Aboriginal users of violence**
 - **Women presenting with alcohol and other drug issues.**
8. **That the Yoorrook Justice Commission calls on the Victorian Government to provide long-term, sustainable funding to resource ACCO programs targeted at providing pre- and post-release support for Aboriginal people in custody, with a specific focus on intensive support to attain and secure suitable housing for the following cohorts:**
 - **Aboriginal women escaping family violence**
 - **Women with children**
 - **Aboriginal people presenting with alcohol and other drug issues**
 - **Aboriginal young people**
 - **Aboriginal men.**
 9. **That the Yoorrook Justice Commission calls on the Victorian Government to transfer all programs designed for Aboriginal people, like the Prison Pathways Housing Program, currently sitting with mainstream, to ACCO's to better support Aboriginal community into safe and secure housing (Aboriginal decision making in Aboriginal hands).**
 10. **That the Yoorrook Justice Commission calls on the Victorian Government to respond to the specific housing needs of Aboriginal Elders, including resourcing a standalone Aboriginal response separate from the mainstream *Ageing Well Action Plan*, this plan must have a focus on preventing Elder abuse, promoting ageing in place and supporting the traditional role of Elders in mentoring Aboriginal young people.**
 11. **That the Yoorrook Justice Commission calls on the Victorian Government to provide targeted funding to ACCOs to address the specific needs of Aboriginal people with disability, including assisting them to obtain and remain in supported housing, access the NDIS and other support as well as addressing stigma in the private rental market.**

Past and present injustices

Background

Aboriginal families and communities continue to endure the intergenerational consequences of colonisation and forced child removal policies, including over representation in child protection and justice systems, higher levels of poverty and marginalisation, under employment, disrupted

family and kinship networks, racism, exclusion from Country and homelessness. Historic factors such as the forceful land acquisition and deliberate exclusion from the economy has led to significant displacement and dispossession of Aboriginal communities, creating not only physical homelessness but also cultural and spiritual homelessness.² Before colonisation, there was no concept of 'homelessness' for Aboriginal people, who all had a place to call home on Country and with kin.³ However, today many Aboriginal people experience homelessness on their own land, and usually at far higher rates than non-Aboriginal people. Centuries of assimilationist policies and practices have resulted in a loss of cultural knowledge, detachment from home, family, culture, land, language, customs and spiritual beliefs.⁴

A major impact of colonisation has been the structures and systems that create a cycle of disadvantage and poverty for Aboriginal people. Poverty plays a detrimental role in the high rates of homelessness amongst Aboriginal families as well as in the removal of children into out-of-home care. Research has found several circumstances associated with poverty are directly correlated with homelessness.⁵ Circumstances such as limited opportunities for education, disability, financial stress, debt, reliance on public housing, social exclusion and living in sub-standard accommodation all make acquiring and sustaining stable housing extremely difficult. These experiences flow through generations of family, creating an intergenerational impact and a cycle of homelessness amongst Aboriginal families and communities.⁶ Western approaches and structures of housing have been imposed on Aboriginal communities by governments. , These structures preference a nuclear family model, rather than housing multi-generational familiesThe Australian Human Rights Commission argues that the housing sector 'prefers a Western-centric idea of a household and disregards Aboriginal cultural norms', which continues to operate as a barrier and point of discrimination against Aboriginal people in the housing market.⁷

Access to adequate housing is a human right, as detailed in Article 11 of the *International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (1966)*. It recognises that everyone has the right to adequate housing where they live in peace, security and dignity. Having stable housing helps to

² Anderson, J. T., & Collins, D. (2014). Prevalence and causes of urban homelessness among Indigenous peoples. A three-country scoping review. *Housing studies*, 29(7), 959-976.

³ Noongar Mia Mia, creati8ng pathways, *Why Aboriginal Homelessness Needs a Cultural Approach*, accessed from: [weblink](#).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ McCaughey, J. (1992). *Where now? Homeless families in the 1990's* (Policy Background Paper No. 8). Australian Institute of Family Studies. Melbourne; Homelessness Australia. (2016). *Homelessness and poverty*. Homelessness Australia.

⁶ Combat Poverty Agency. (2004). *What is poverty?*

⁷ Ibid.



support and sustain positive outcomes in employment, health and improvement in education.⁸ Aboriginal Victorians are missing out on the human right to adequate housing more than any other group in Victoria. In 2019, 17 per cent of Aboriginal people in Victoria received homeless services in comparison to less than 2 per cent of all Victorians, with the state having the highest rate of representation for homeless assistance by Aboriginal people anywhere in Australia.⁹ In 2021, Aboriginal people were experiencing contact with homelessness services at ten times the rate of other Victorians, accessing social housing at ten times the rate of other Victorians and facing growing exposure to the private rental market in which around half of low-income earners experience housing stress.¹⁰ It must be noted that it is also expected these figures under-represent the actual number of people facing homelessness, as much of the problem is hidden and often under-estimated in data collection.¹¹

Most data is based on homelessness support service usage, and therefore does not include those in alternative accommodation or sleeping rough. ABS data from 2016 suggests that at least 17 per cent of Aboriginal people were not accounted for on the census night, highlighting the challenges with adequately estimating those in transitional housing, staying with kin or sleeping rough.¹² Further to this, some data around the number of Aboriginal people who experience homelessness is based on mainstream homeless service usage and therefore does not capture those who have not accessed homeless services due to fear of stigma, lack of services in regional or remote areas, or apprehension of accessing services that may be culturally inappropriate.¹³ Access to homelessness services is also limited due to under-resourcing. Many people who present to services cannot be supported or referred to accommodation due to the lack of short-term accommodation options and the growing numbers of people using short- and medium-term accommodation for long periods due to being unable to access any long-term housing options.¹⁴

⁸ AIHW. (2018). Housing assistance in Australia. Canberra: Australian Government.

⁹ Productivity Commission. (2019). Report on government service 2019: Housing and homelessness. Canberra: Australian Government.

¹⁰ Mana-na worn-tyeen maar-takoort, Every Aboriginal Person has a Home, Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework (2021).

¹¹ Aboriginal Housing Victoria. (2019). The Victorian Aboriginal housing and homelessness summit: Report of findings. Melbourne: Aboriginal Housing Victoria.

¹² ABS. (2016). ABS 3238.0.55.001 - Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

¹³ Aboriginal Housing Victoria (2019).

¹⁴ Parliament of Victoria, Legislative Council, Legal and Social Issues Committee, Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria, Final Report (2021).

The lack of transition into long term housing is having disastrous effects on homelessness services and the people who access them, which flows onto to people seeking help from other services requiring accommodation. Victoria's *Mana-na worn-tyeen maar-takoort – Every Aboriginal Person has a Home, Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework* is oriented around the housing continuum; it seeks to shift norms from crisis to long-term housing options. This must be the basis of all government action, to prioritise the aspirations of Aboriginal people to have increasing independence and access to long-term social housing, private rentals or own their own home.

Home ownership

Historically, Aboriginal households have had significantly lower rates of home ownership compared to the broader population, which results in less opportunity for gaining the benefits of intergenerational wealth created by home ownership. As home ownership has become increasingly expensive and out of reach for many, a vast majority of people are relying on private rental as a long-term option rather than a transitional home.¹⁵ Across the nation, Aboriginal households are half as likely to own their own home (with or without a mortgage),¹⁶ and for Aboriginal people in Victoria, the rate of securing a home is 25 percentage points lower than other Victorians.¹⁷ For Aboriginal families with a mortgage, VACCA staff have reported that recent increases to interest rates, coupled with the rise the rate of inflation are contributing to significant financial stress.

Over the past decade, successive Commonwealth governments have used home ownership grants and concessions totalling \$20.5 billion to encourage lower income first homeowners to enter the market.¹⁸ Contrary to the aims of this policy approach, evidence suggests these loans primarily assisted households across the country who were already close to accessing a home, and contributed to increasing house prices, resulting in cycles of intergenerational wealth and intergenerational homeownership, whilst locking others out of the market for generations.¹⁹ Several factors make the Australian housing market unique to other countries, including that the market relies extremely heavily on private homeownership, with half of private rentals owned by a

¹⁵ Stone, W.M., Goodall, Z.A, Peters, A. and Veeroja, P. (2021) Aboriginal Private Rental Access in Victoria: "Excluded from the Start", A Report Commissioned by the Consumer Policy Research Centre, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne.

¹⁶ Productivity Commission (2022) In need of Repair: The National Housing and Homelessness Agreement – Study Report

¹⁷ Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework. (2022). 2022 Annual Report Card, p. 13. Retrieved from: [weblink](#).

¹⁸ Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited. (2023).

¹⁹ Ibid.

landlord who has a single dwelling, and 90 per cent by landlords who have fewer than four.²⁰ Housing legislation is heavily weighted toward the interest of landlords, and by international standards the rental market is light on regulation and affords power to landlords to manage the majority of details as they see fit, including appointing tenants and managing the length of a lease agreements.²¹ Alongside this, in Australia both properties and landlords churn in and out of the sector rapidly, which makes the housing sector structurally insecure.²²

Despite programs being put in place to respond to the disparity in home ownership for Aboriginal community, responses have failed to significantly shift the number of Aboriginal homeowners in Victoria. For example, in 2021 the Victorian Government launched the Victorian Homebuyer fund shared equity program through HomesVic. The uptake of this program was only one Aboriginal household in 2019-2020 and zero from 2020-2021, whilst in the broader population 85 households used the fund from 2019-2020 and 53 from 2020-2021.²³ As noted by the Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness 2022 report, this suggests that significant barriers continue to exist to Aboriginal home ownership.

Recommendations:

- 1. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission calls on the Victorian Government to resource ACCOs to respond to barriers facing prospective Aboriginal homeowners including expanding knowledge and education strategies on how to enter the home ownership market.**
- 2. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission calls on the Victorian Government to partner with the ACCO sector and undertake the development of new and innovative shared equity schemes and rent-to-buy initiatives for Aboriginal Victorians to expand access to home ownership.**

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Stone, W.M., Goodall, Z.A, Peters, A. and Veeroja, P. (2021) Aboriginal Private Rental Access in Victoria: "Excluded from the Start", A Report Commissioned by the Consumer Policy Research Centre, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne.

²² Ibid.

²³ Mana-na worn-tyeen maar-takoort, Every Aboriginal Person Has a Home, Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework, available at: [weblink](#).

The private rental market

For Aboriginal Victorians, reliance on and use of the private rental sector has significantly increased in recent decades. Data from the 2016 and 2011 Census years indicated that the proportion of Aboriginal Victorians renting privately has increased in this period, from 27.9 per cent to 35.4 per cent of the population.²⁴ However, despite this increase, a report on the accessibility of mainstream housing services for Aboriginal Victorians outlined barriers to accessing mainstream services including racism, affordability, lack of culturally safe services, shame and fear, a lack of awareness of available services and complex administrative processes.²⁵ The private rental sector has become increasingly unaffordable across Australia, with the median to low-income private renter household spending 36 per cent of its income on rent in 2019-2020, and approximately 20 per cent of this cohort spending over half their income on rent.²⁶

Currently, applicants for a private rental must undergo 'screening' and 'ranking' based on employment and rental histories to secure a property.²⁷ While screening according to employment status and rental history raises concerns about discrimination and privilege, it is even more difficult to discern if someone is rejected from a rental property based on factors outside of those formally assessed by a rental provider, including the makeup of their family or racial discrimination. 'Excluded from the start', a 2022 report on Aboriginal private rental access in Victoria, found that Aboriginal people often experience discrimination along every stage of the rental journey, including attending inspections, talking with real estate agents, applying, and requesting maintenance once residing in a rental property, but discrimination is particularly pronounced at the 'applying' stage.²⁸ Along this journey Aboriginal renters are faced with a lack of culturally safe services, complex administrative processes and a lack of affordable and appropriate options for themselves and their families. Compounding these experiences is the increased competition posed by the low vacancy rate of private rentals, and the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Current interventions to increase the supply of private rental are not meeting the demand within the community. Victoria is projected to be the second fastest growing state in Aboriginal

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Victorian Auditor General's Office. (2014). Accessibility of Mainstream Services for Aboriginal Victorians. Victorian Government. No 325.

²⁶ Martin, C., Lawson, J., Milligan, V., Hartley, C., Pawson, H. and Dodson, J. (2023) Towards an Australian Housing and Homelessness Strategy: understanding national approaches in contemporary policy, AHURI Final Report No. 401, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, retrieved from: [weblink](#).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

population by 2026 and increase by over a third, with an annual growth rate of 2.5 to 2.6 per cent.²⁹ Alongside this population growth, demand for intensive family services is forecast to rise to 1,700 Aboriginal families by 2028, and demand for non-intensive family services is forecast to be 5,500 Aboriginal households by 2028.³⁰ The demand for these services will be highest in the suburbs of Loddon, Mallee, Central Highlands, Inner Gippsland, Barwon, Bayside Peninsula, North Eastern Metropolitan and Southern Metropolitan.³¹ Correspondingly, access to social and affordable housing should be prioritised in these growth corridors of population and service demand to ensure Aboriginal families have access to safe, secure and affordable housing alongside appropriate services.

In response to the lack of housing options across the state, the Victorian Labor Government committed to several areas of reform in their 2022 election platform, surrounding partnering with ACCOs, working with the not-for-profit sector to increase housing stock for Aboriginal people and responding to unmet needs. These targeted initiatives include the 'More Than a Landlord' program run through Aboriginal Housing Victoria (AHV), the 'Aboriginal Private Rental Assistance Program' (APRAP) delivered by a number of ACCOs and the 'HomesVic Aboriginal Victorians Shared Equity Program'. Preceding this, in 2020 the *Big Housing Build* was announced, allocating \$5.3 billion to build more than 12,000 new homes across the State, with 10 per cent of all net social dwellings allocated for Aboriginal Victorians.³² The programs targeted to Aboriginal Victorians have seen success in responding to homelessness and housing insecurity and have been found to show early promise as a bridge between discriminatory and exclusionary processes and practices, providing better housing futures for Aboriginal. The APRAP program is currently undergoing expansion to four DFFH areas across the state including Bayside Peninsula, Outer Gippsland, Goulburn and Brimbank Melton.³³ The More than a Landlord program facilitated the transfer of title of public housing stock from the Victorian Government to Aboriginal Housing Victoria (AHV), and facilitated new forms of engagement between AHV, its tenants and service providers, giving the opportunity for Aboriginal people to access a service more consistent with Aboriginal cultural values and

²⁹ Northern Western Melbourne Primary Health Network, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Area Profile, 2017, retrieved from: [weblink](#).

³⁰ SVA Consulting, Demand for services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria (Report prepared for the Aboriginal Executive Council), 2019, retrieved from: [weblink](#).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Homes Victoria, the Big Housing Build, accessed June 2023, retrieved from: [weblink](#).

³³ The State Government of Victoria, Media Release, *Boost for Aboriginal Housing Services*, available at: [weblink](#).

responsive to their specific needs.³⁴ Prior to accessing the program, 50 per cent of households reported living in insecure, transitional housing at risk of homelessness, with 78.8 per cent saying they felt like they were at home when they moved into an AHV managed household.³⁵ In the year 2022-2023, the program helped more than 1000 Aboriginal Victorians to achieve and sustain their tenancies.³⁶ Despite the success of this program, it was not re-funded under the most recent Victorian State Budget and has left a large gap in the housing response for Aboriginal Victorians, at time when accessing housing is largely unattainable. In addition, housing organisations across Victoria, alongside the Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Forum, have called for an increase in the Big Housing Build and a further commitment to tracking the allocation of housing to Aboriginal community, with a focus on regional areas.

The housing shortage is particularly acute in regional areas. Over the last year, VACCA has been conducting community needs assessments (CNA) across multiple VACCA regions and has identified housing as a significant issue across the state. The ongoing housing crisis is displacing many VACCA clients from their homes and neighbourhoods, with many becoming homeless or at risk of becoming homeless due to the lack of rental and alternative accommodation options. For example, in the Ovens Murray region VACCA staff reported up to 100 people camping by the river in Wangarrata due to a lack of housing options. It is imperative that housing stock can service the rapidly growing demand in the state, the following snapshot highlights some of the barriers Aboriginal renters face in regional areas:

Regional housing crisis snapshot: Ovens Murray

VACCA staff have raised that housing and homelessness are a significant issue in Ovens Murray. A number of factors are driving this including low vacancy rates, increases in rent and intersecting issues such as mental health, alcohol and drug misuse and family violence. Ovens Murray encompasses a large regional area, which means many rural clients are not able to access social housing and there are limited rental properties available. Additionally, the few services available in the region are challenging for our clients to access due to limited access to transport. Our clients are experiencing discrimination and prejudice due to distrust

³⁴ First 1000 Days Australia & Aboriginal Housing Victoria 2018, More than a Landlord Household Pilot Study: Report, Indigenous Health Equity Unit, The University of Melbourne and Aboriginal Housing Victoria, Melbourne.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Aboriginal Housing Victoria, State Budget housing crisis response excludes Aboriginal Victorians (2023), retrieved from: <https://ahvic.org.au/comms-news/advocacy-news/state-budget-housing-crisis-response-excludes-aboriginal-victorians>.

from local real estate agencies as well as motels when seeking accommodation services. Staff acknowledged that young people who leave out-of-home care are at very high risk of experiencing homelessness once Child Protection, Kinship, Better Futures and Homestretch programs cease offering support. Young people leaving out-of-home care are often reported to come back to VACCA to access supports as adults. Rent was reported to be \$450 per week for a two-bedroom rental unit, which is not affordable for many VACCA clients who require additional support and many lower income families in general.

Recommendations:

- 3. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission calls on the Victorian Government to extend the Big Housing Build to meet the projected demand in population growth and commit to tracking more accurately the allocation to Aboriginal community.**
- 4. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission calls on the Victorian Government commit to providing \$7.6 million per annum to the 'More than a Landlord' program and \$10.5 million per annum to extend the 'Aboriginal Private Rental Assistance Program' with statewide coverage, as called for by the Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Forum.**

Social Housing

The housing crisis is particularly acute in Victoria, where access to social and affordable housing is lacking. According to the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) median rents in Melbourne increased by more than 14.6 per cent in the year to March 2023 due to increased demand for rentals fuelled by population growth and immigration, alongside the continuous interest rate hikes across the country, with rents increasing seven times faster than wages.³⁷ More than 4,000 of Victoria's Aboriginal households (around one in five) have sought social housing through the Victorian Housing Register (VHR).³⁸ In Victoria, just 3 per cent of housing stock is

³⁷ The State Government of Victoria, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, Annual Report, 2021-2022.

³⁸ <https://vahhf.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/victorian-aboriginal-housing-and-homelessness-framework-complete-26-02-20-2.pdf>

registered as social housing, with the national average being 4.2 per cent.³⁹ Data from the most recent DFFH annual report shows there were 86,887 social housing dwellings across Victoria as of 30 June 2022, which is only a net increase of 74 dwellings since June 2018, despite the Big Housing Build.⁴⁰ At the same time, the social housing waitlist in Victoria has grown by 45 per cent, with an estimated 119,000 people being now on the waitlist.⁴¹ Households with the greatest need are kept waiting an average of 17 months, and multiple years for others.⁴² In comparison, the national average wait time for high needs households is six months.⁴³

In addition, findings from the Productivity Commission in 2019 showed that Victoria was spending less than half as much on social housing than New South Wales, in 2017-2018 Victoria spent \$83 per person, in comparison to the national average of \$167.⁴⁴ These factors have combined to create the crisis we are now witnessing, resulting in an increase in homelessness and the use of insecure and unsafe housing, which is particularly pronounced for Aboriginal Victorians. The 2019 Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Summit report found that to address the shortfall of social housing, an additional 5085 housing units were required in Victoria by 2036, and that if existing policy settings remain in place there will be a significant increase in Aboriginal homelessness and a rapid expansion in the Aboriginal population's share of public housing places.⁴⁵

Recommendation:

- 5. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission call on the Victorian Government to build 5000+ social housing properties by 2036 (300 houses per annum) to meet future social housing demand, as called for by the Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework.**

Housing in relation to specific need

³⁹ Community Housing Industry Association Victoria, Victorian Social Housing Investment Fund would deliver 20,000 homes over the next decade (2022), retrieved from: [weblink](#).

⁴⁰ Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, Annual Report 2021-2022, retrieved from: [weblink](#).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Council to Homeless Persons, *Victoria's alarming social housing wait time blowouts spark calls for action*, 2023, retrieved from: [weblink](#).

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ The Australian Government Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services 2019, Housing and Homelessness (2019), retrieved from: [weblink](#).

⁴⁵ The Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Summit, *Report of Findings*, 2019. retrieved from: [weblink](#).

Whilst the Aboriginal community overall experience poorer housing outcomes than the general population, the lack of adequate housing options is having more pronounced effects on specific groups including Aboriginal young people, Aboriginal care leavers, Aboriginal people escaping family violence, Aboriginal Elders and Aboriginal people exiting the criminal justice system. The following sections outline how these groups are impacted:

Aboriginal young people

The likelihood of Aboriginal young people slipping through the cracks of support services and becoming homeless is greater compared to non-Aboriginal young people.⁴⁶ Aboriginal young people thrive when they grow up in a safe and nurturing environment, connected to culture, Country and kin. However, Aboriginal young people experience marginalisation in additional ways to non-Aboriginal young people through oppression, racism and disconnection from culture and Country.⁴⁷ These experiences have been linked to homelessness as well as higher rates of suicide, violence, depression and substance abuse.⁴⁸ Access to safe and secure housing, in particular through the private rental system, continues to be difficult for Aboriginal young people. Research indicates that students, young people and people who are deriving all or most of their income from Centrelink can be prevented from accessing the private rental market due to discrimination based on myths and stereotypes that they will not pay rent on time or look after the property well.⁴⁹ As discussed above, the rental system relies on stable employment, the ability to navigate a complex application process and pay large amounts of money upfront and increasingly on demonstrating past rental history and references.⁵⁰ These factors often lock young people out of the rental system and contribute to high levels of homelessness and insecure housing.

In 2021, 8,830 young people approached homelessness services in Victoria, with 5,060 turned away due to a lack of service capacity.⁵¹ When young people do access private rental and experience difficulties such as staying on top of rental payments, they face the risk of eviction and the

⁴⁶ Baskin, C. (2007). Aboriginal youth talk about structural determinants as the causes of their homelessness. *First Peoples Child & Family Review*, 3(3), 31-42.

⁴⁷ Productivity Commission. (2019). Report on government service 2019: Community Services.

⁴⁸ Patrick (2014). Aboriginal homelessness in Canada: A literature review. Toronto: Canadian Homelessness Research Network Pres.

⁴⁹ Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, Locked out – Discrimination in Victoria’s private rental market (2012).

⁵⁰ Aboriginal Private Rental Access in Victoria: “Excluded from the Start”, 2021.

⁵¹ Australian Government, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Australia’s Health (2022).

possibility of being 'blacklisted' on a tenant database for owing the rental provider money, jeopardising their chance at finding a private rental property in the future and locking them into a cycle of insecure housing.⁵² Young people may also require access to other services, such as counselling or financial support. Whilst services such as assertive outreach, multidisciplinary supports and case management are important, these approaches are crisis driven and cannot create long term change without permanent housing infrastructure.⁵³

Aboriginal care leavers

Aboriginal children and young people are over-represented in the child welfare system, and Victoria has the highest rates of removal for Aboriginal children.⁵⁴ Victoria's out-of-home care rate for Aboriginal children at June 30 2021 was 103 children per 1000, almost twice the national rate for Aboriginal children of 57.6 per 1,000; and 22 times the rate for non-Aboriginal children in Victoria of 4.7 children per 1000.⁵⁵ Young people leaving care should have the skills, supports and connections necessary to thrive. With strong connections to culture and community to draw on that build strength and resilience, young people are better able to navigate the next chapter in their lives. However, Aboriginal young people leaving care are a particularly vulnerable group to homelessness and housing stress because leaving care supports do not always meeting their needs. This occurs for a variety of reasons, including high caseloads, late referrals, and limited resources for ACCOs to provide culturally appropriate support.

Data indicates that more than half of Aboriginal people in contact with homeless services in Australia are under 25 years of age and Aboriginal young people are overrepresented in the homeless population within a year of leaving care (at a rate of more than one in three).^{56,57} Inadequate income support payments not only play a significant role in financial hardship but the *Adequacy of Newstart* report also found that lower payment rates for young people under 22 years of age contributed to the rise of youth homelessness.⁵⁸ Young people leaving care are faced with challenges in accessing employment, education and housing in addition to being at a greater

⁵² Tenants Victoria, Tenant Databases or 'blacklists', accessed June 2023, retrieved from: [weblink](#).

⁵³ CHP. (2018). Victorian homelessness election platform 2018. Collingwood, Melbourne: CHP.

⁵⁴ Productivity Commission. (2022). Closing the Gap Information Repository, Table CtG12A.1. Retrieved from: [weblink](#).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Campo, M., & Commerford, J. (2016). Supporting young people leaving out-of-home care (CFCA Paper No. 41). Canberra: Australian Institute of Family Studies

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Commonwealth of Australia (2020) Adequacy of Newstart and related payments and alternative mechanisms to determine the level of income support payments in Australia, Senate Community Affairs References Committee, Parliament House, Canberra.

risk of early parenthood, becoming involved in the criminal justice system, drug and alcohol abuse and developing a mental illness.⁵⁹ Each of these challenges becomes exacerbated when they leave care and require stable, safe accommodation that is appropriate to their needs. A lack of housing support and forced homelessness are common challenges for young people leaving care due to poor transition planning and a shortage of affordable housing.⁶⁰ In 2019-2020 more than 300 young people exited out-of-home care into the homeless services system in Victoria, with one in six being Aboriginal.⁶¹ This is where VACCA's Better Futures program, alongside the suite of targeted support services for Aboriginal young people including Targeted Care Packages, Lead Tenant and Navigator Programs, has provided much needed support. In 2021, the Victorian Government announced the extension of support for care leavers to the age of 21 through the provision of Better Futures which delivers the Home Stretch brokerage.⁶² Better Futures is the case management program of leaving care which can be accessed by young people from 15'9 months-21 years, even if they have left care. There is brokerage under Better Futures to support the needs and aspirations of individual young people.

VACCA and the Victorian Aboriginal Children and Young People's Alliance have launched the *Better Futures Our Way: A Practice Guide for Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations*. The guide provides background information about the Better Futures program as well as practice wisdom and guidance for practitioners and their managers about how the program can be delivered the Aboriginal way. It also describes the procedures, tools and templates that guide and resource the work of ACCO based Better Futures workers. The immediate value of the Guide is in providing ACCOs with a thorough understanding of the Better Futures program. It also shares practice tips and ideas to help workers find new and creative ways to support Aboriginal young people on their journeys, working in the Aboriginal way, and shares Aboriginal culturally centred way of delivering Better Futures. This is based on the understanding that self-determination and cultural connection as central to healing and to supporting a successful transition from out-of-home care. Ultimately, the Guide aims to help build positive outcomes for Aboriginal young people, including strengthened connection to their families, community and culture, a known protective factor in transitioning from care to supported independence.

⁵⁹ Campo, M., & Commerford, J. (2016). Supporting young people leaving out-of-home care (CFCA Paper No. 41). Canberra: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework. (2022).

⁶² *Child, Youth and Families Act, 2005(Vic)*, Chapter 2, s16; and Premier announcement ' Home Stretch Helping More Youth People Leaving Care' 22 June 2021. [Home Stretch Helping More Young People Leaving Care | Premier of Victoria](#).

Recommendation:

- 6. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission calls on the Victorian Government to address the needs of Aboriginal young people exiting out-of-home care, including investment in ACCOs to provide wrap around supports so young people leaving care can attain culturally safe, secure, affordable and long-term housing, as well as additional supports required to assist them to maintain their tenancy.**

The intersection of family violence and homelessness

Family violence is one of the main reasons that Aboriginal young people, women, families and men enter homelessness.⁶³ For affected family members seeking to leave a violent household, there is a lack of options available when they require safe, secure and specialised housing to meet their needs. For children and young people, family violence is the leading cause of homelessness and can have a detrimental impact on their life trajectory, affecting their educational, physical, mental and emotional wellbeing and development.⁶⁴ Aboriginal children, women and families are disproportionately over-represented in rates of family violence, with Aboriginal women being 15 times more likely to access homelessness and crisis housing than non-Aboriginal women.⁶⁵ Everyone has the right to secure housing and somewhere they feel safe. Family violence undermines this right and pushes victims to leave their home and find accommodation elsewhere. However, many women who seek specialist homelessness services request assistance as they do not have the financial stability to acquire housing and consequently their options are extremely limited, impacting on their ability to leave a violent environment. Currently, there are only 423 government funded crisis beds across Victoria, yet the state experiences more than 9,500 instances of emergency accommodation required each year.⁶⁶ Alternative crisis accommodation consists of options which are not culturally safe or long-term, including motels, boarding houses, hostels and caravan parks.

⁶³ Closing the Gap Clearinghouse (AIHW & AIFS). (2016). Family violence prevention programs in Indigenous communities (Resource sheet no. 37). Produced by the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse. Canberra: AIHW & Melbourne: AIFS.

⁶⁴ DiNicola, K., Liyanarachchi, D., & Plummer, J. Out of the shadows: Domestic and family violence: A leading cause of homelessness in Australia. Mission Australia.

⁶⁵ Braybrook, A. (2016). Family violence in Aboriginal communities. Extract from submission to the Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence. Retrieved from: [weblink](#).

⁶⁶ Australian Government Productivity Commission, In need of repair: The National Housing and Homelessness Agreement Study Report (2022).

In addition, compounding housing stressors such as unstable housing tenure, homelessness, mortgage and rental stress due to family violence causes families to become vulnerable and at risk of involvement from child protection and to child removal. A lack of safe and stable housing, particularly for families exposed to family violence, contributes to both the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children and young people placed in out-of-home care. We note that while poverty can be a contributing factor for family violence, experiences of family violence can also increase the risk of housing stress and homelessness and therefore poverty. Unaffordable or insecure housing means that those fleeing violence, in particular women and children, are often economically dependent on users of family violence. In addition, financial abuse is a highly prevalent issue in Australia with severe impacts on women and children, yet is often not given the adequate weight it deserves in family violence prevention and response.⁶⁷ Women are often faced with living with family violence or entering policy induced poverty,⁶⁸ with research identifying how insufficient social security payments contribute to the experience of financial hardship.⁶⁹ For Aboriginal families, this illustrates why the provision of Aboriginal-specific, culturally safe, affordable and accessible housing is key to addressing the cycle of poverty, family violence and homelessness. This must also be combined with ACCO-led, wrap-around, trauma informed responses that support the specific needs of Aboriginal families affected by family violence.

Promising practice: responding to the housing needs of Aboriginal women affected by violence

VACCA's Orana Gunyah program is one example of community-led service delivery embedded in Aboriginal self-determination and the rights of women and children. It supports Aboriginal women and children, women with Aboriginal children or carers with Aboriginal children fleeing family violence. All clients that seek refuge receive full therapeutic and case management, including administrative support to complete public, social and private rental housing paperwork. Since its conception, Orana Gunyah Outreach has supported 370 women and 527 children. The crisis accommodation aspect of the program has housed 139 women with children, and while some have returned to the situation they left, most have moved to other refuges, to stay with kin or acquired public housing or a private rental. The correlation between family violence and homelessness for

⁶⁷ Deloitte Access Economics and Commonwealth Bank (2022). The cost of financial abuse in Australia. [Weblink](#).

⁶⁸ Summers, A. (2022). The Choice: Violence or Poverty. University of Technology Sydney p22

⁶⁹ Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety. (2022). *Economic security and intimate partner violence: Research synthesis*. ANROWS.

Aboriginal women and children has in the past remained a hidden issue as Aboriginal women are apprehensive to approach mainstream services due to fear that if they disclose the presence of family violence, their children may be removed. Yet, when access to an Aboriginal specific, culturally appropriate, and wrap-around response is available there is an increase in the number of Aboriginal women and children seeking assistance. A culturally safe response supports women's willingness to come forward, fosters empowerment and allows women to see a positive future for themselves and their children. Orana Gunya is only in one of VACCA's regions, we know there is community need for crisis accommodation across all VACCA regions, VACCA recommends that government fund Aboriginal led family violence crisis accommodation across all regions.

Users of violence

According to VACCA staff, one of the major barriers to successful programs for users of violence is the current lack of housing options for users of violence who require support to address their behaviours. VACCA is currently running a Family Violence Men's program in Gippsland, which has been highly successful in providing therapeutic support for Aboriginal men in the region via Family Violence 1-1 individual case management and group work counselling service. This program has a focus on:

- Understanding family violence
- Understanding and dealing with intergenerational trauma
- Talking about relationships and emotional regulation strategies for Persons using violence.
- Connecting to culture via Group work activates to promote healing: such as artwork camping and fishing on country, making clap sticks, boomerangs and spears, gym sessions golfing and through music.

VACCA Family Violence case workers have noted that when men engage in these programs, it is important to assess the social risk of the person using violence. Men who use violence are often displaced from the home as a condition of their Family Violence Intervention Order (FVIO). Homelessness has been an ongoing challenge for men accessing our program, due to the lack of housing options and high prices for temporary accommodation, which puts men in the program at constant risk of homelessness. However, if we address homelessness in the program, we minimise client disengagement and breaching of FVIO.

Although VACCA submits a Victorian Housing Register application for all Family Violence program participants, they must find accommodation in the interim and this is often expensive and

inappropriate for the client needs. For example, case managers report that they often rely on purchased motel accommodation, which can total up to \$1000 per week and can reach \$8000 if a participant engages for the full eight-week program. This accommodation is not therapeutic or supportive of men who often have highly complex needs. This detracts from case managers ability to further engage clients in activities such as counselling or achieving practical goals.

However, if they are unable to accommodate program participants this can result in them breaking their FVIO and returning to the home of a partner, which cause them to be re-arrested. The lack of safe, affordable crisis, short- and long-term housing options, particularly for clients with complex needs, alongside the stress that comes from insecure housing can also cause men to disengage in the therapeutic elements of the program, limiting the progress that could otherwise have been made. The below case study illustrates how inadequate and unsuitable housing is a major barrier in effectively working with men to address their behaviours and stop using violence.

Case Story: Family Violence and Intersection with Homelessness

Thomas and his mother lived in a bus located at a local caravan park. Thomas moved in with his mother in the caravan park after a period of homelessness. Thomas was diagnosed in his teenage years with schizophrenia and has been struggling, living with ADHD, anxiety and depression.

Thomas was sleeping one evening and woke in the middle of the night and asked his mother for a smoke. When she refused Thomas became upset and began holding his mother down on the bed by her throat and pushed his knuckles into her face. He was also verbally aggressive throughout the following day. When he went to sleep his mother was able to leave the bus and go and stay with a neighbor in the caravan park. The police were called, and Thomas was arrested, charged, and issued an interim Family Violence intervention Order with full exclusion orders.

Thomas was referred to the VACCA's Family Violence Men's Group by The Orange Door for assessment and intake into an eight-week men's program for FV counselling. During the intake and assessment process Thomas recognised that his actions have displaced him from living with his mother and that he had no other support networks that would assist him, leaving him homeless.

VACCA's Family Violence Men's Group has a limited annual budget to assist clients with brokerage such as accommodation, mobile phones, and Coles Store Cards whilst they are engaging in the program. The program provided therapeutic counselling service to Thomas for 7-weeks. In addition, as part of the supports, VACCA supported him with short term motel accommodation. The program

also provided Thomas with assistance to obtain his identification documents to assist with his housing applications to Community Housing for a Transitional Housing Management property as well as his Victorian Housing Register application for public housing.

VACCA provided Thomas with referral to a psychologist to assess his mental health issues and treat his AOD behaviors, and his VACCA worker provided transport to and from the four psychology sessions.

Unfortunately, Thomas began to experience challenges with his mental health and damaged his motel accommodation whilst unwell. As a result, he was evicted from his accommodation. This caused instability in Thomas' life, which impacted his ability to engage in the program. Ultimately, Thomas disengaged from the program and his case file was closed, after having completed 7 of 8 men's group sessions.

Recommendation:

- 7. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission calls upon the Victorian Government to expand the availability of Aboriginal led transitional and crisis accommodation and support services for Aboriginal people affected by violence and users of family violence, including facilities that can support Aboriginal women presenting with alcohol and other drug issues.**

Aboriginal people exiting prison

The experience of social exclusion and isolation for Aboriginal people while in prison is particularly disruptive to connection to family, community, Country, and culture. This means that when exiting prison, many Aboriginal people need support with reconnecting back into their communities for healing and reintegration. Those who do not have access to supports, housing or are unable to return to their communities are at greater risk of homelessness. In 2021-22, around one third of people exiting prison who received support from specialist homelessness services identified as Aboriginal.⁷⁰ Aboriginal people often exit prison into unsafe hostels and boarding houses from private providers. This type of short-term, unstable, and unsafe accommodation is not appropriate

⁷⁰ AIHW (2022). Specialist homelessness services annual report 2021–22. (Weblink)

to the needs of Aboriginal people exiting prison. Additionally, inadequate, or insecure housing for Aboriginal people leaving prison can make individuals vulnerable to re-offending and recidivism.⁷¹

Moreover, under Victoria's harsh bail laws, Aboriginal people, particularly women, are often incarcerated on remand for several months for minor offences and are at increased risk of losing their housing during this time. Aboriginal people who are detained within the criminal justice system are also often unable to access bail, parole or a Corrections Order due to their inability to demonstrate access to secure housing.⁷² This perpetuates the cycle of incarceration and homelessness for Aboriginal people. For Aboriginal young people, barriers to housing access are more pronounced when exiting the justice system. Systemic racism across Victoria's criminal justice systems as well as all service sectors including child protection, health, housing and education, places Aboriginal children and young people at greater risk of having contact with the system as well as creating additional barriers to successfully transitioning back into community with sufficient supports after leaving custody. Currently, the Enhanced Housing Pathways program exists which provides short term case management and flexible funding to assist people post-release to access housing and prevent homelessness. This program is currently run through mainstream organisations, and VACCA recommends the transfer of this program to ACCOs to better support Aboriginal community into safe and secure housing. In addition, VACCA provides a number of prior to and post-release support programs that include support in finding suitable housing:

Youth Through Care (YTC) Program

Aboriginal young people grow up strong when connected to culture and community. VACCA's YTC program draws on strength and connection to culture and community, creating an opportunity to engage with children and young people in custody prior to and post release. The YTC program is an intensive, client-centred, holistic, culturally appropriate, trauma-informed program, with a strong connection to Country and family that supports Aboriginal and young people's exiting detention. The program provides an effective model for YTC provider organisations and aims to reduce the rates and severity of recidivism by providing wrap around supports such as holistic therapeutic case management and supporting them to attain suitable housing. The YTC program utilises a theory of change which illustrates the elements of an effective model of through-care.

⁷¹ Aboriginal Housing Victoria (2020). Mana-na worn-tyeen maar-takoort, Every Aboriginal Person has a Home, Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework. (Weblink)

⁷² Ibid.

Trusted, well qualified YTC Case Workers provide appropriate therapeutic case management and deliver it in a culturally safe, client centred and trauma-informed manner.

VACCA's YTC program is client-led and voluntary, with a strong intention that the young people they work with have to want to engage. The extended scope enables the option to work with young people for approximately two years, whether on a youth justice order or not. One of the key points of difference between YTC's approach and other justice support services is a commitment to remaining committed, non-judgmental and trauma-informed, often working for six months with a young person before seeing their engagement. Our program knows that each young person is at a different stage of their cultural journey, so they adjust their approach to recognise the differing needs and goals.

Beyond Survival Program

VACCA delivers the Beyond Survival program across Victorian prisons including Tarrengower and Dame Phyllis Frost Centre. It is a 3-day group program that provides trauma informed facilitation of narrative group work for prisoners including yarning circles to support healing and to strengthen each person's connectedness to family, community and culture. The program also provides a point of contact post release to support people to navigate and access Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal services, including support with accessing and sustaining housing. In doing so, creating wrap around supports that will help sustain the positive changes made in prison, build their protective factors to maximise effective reintegration into the community and reduce the likelihood of reoffending.

VACCA's Beyond Survival program has received consistent positive feedback from participants and justice staff for many years. Programs are well attended, with participants often asking for longer programs. Participants have reported that the program has given them an opportunity to let go of past traumas and begin to heal, as well as given them a deeper understanding of their own and their families stories to find forgiveness and healing as well as engage with practical support such as access to housing. They have also reported that they love the way the program is delivered, with trust and safety underpinning the program.



Recommendations:

- 8. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission calls on the Victorian Government to provide long-term, sustainable funding to resource ACCO programs targeted at providing pre- and post-release support for Aboriginal people in custody, with a specific focus on intensive support to attain and secure suitable housing.**

- 9. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission calls on the Victorian Government to transfer the Prison Pathways Housing Program, currently sitting with mainstream, to ACCO's to better support Aboriginal community into safe and secure housing.**

Aboriginal Elders

Aboriginal Elders have a wealth of knowledge in cultural practices, protocols and lore, they are the connection between our ancestors that have come before us, to impart cultural knowledge to the next generation. However, the evidence and our practice experience show that our Elders face financial hardship, financial stress and homelessness at a higher rate than non-Aboriginal people aged 50 and over. On Census night in 2016, nearly 3% of Aboriginal people aged 50 and over were homeless.⁷³ Nearly two thirds of this group lived in severely crowded dwellings and around 1 in 6 lived in improvised dwellings or tents or were sleeping rough.⁷⁴ In comparison, less than 1 per cent of non-Aboriginal older Australians were homeless.⁷⁵ Elders have an important caring role in Aboriginal communities. Care provided by kin in traditional Aboriginal cultures has been part of the normal fabric of society for time immemorial. Grandparents, Aunts, Uncles and cousins raising and supporting Aboriginal children and young people is a fundamental part of Aboriginal society, this 'collective community focus' is a strength of Aboriginal culture and is a protective factor. This example of extended family support is how traditional societies and moieties functioned and thrived and goes beyond the Western traditional views of family and parental roles. Given this caring role, experiences of financial hardship, homelessness and housing stress by Elders can have flow on effects on children and young people as well as the wider family group.

⁷³ ABS 2016. National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, 2014–15, Table Builder. ABS cat. no. 4720.0.55.002. Canberra: ABS.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵

In Victoria, *Ageing well in Victoria: An action plan for strengthening wellbeing for senior Victorians* includes an action for improved housing options for older people experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, based on the principle of 'ageing in place'. This includes flexible housing options to age in place in locations that maintain social networks and action to prevent and respond to homelessness among older people as a priority cohort. Additionally, dwellings need to be able to accommodate changing needs of Elders, this might include ensuring that multiple generations of the same family can live close by, as well as any additional infrastructure to assist with daily activities due to illness or disability.

Recommendation:

10. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission calls on the Victorian Government to respond to the specific housing needs of Aboriginal Elders, including resourcing a standalone Aboriginal response separate from the mainstream *Ageing Well Action Plan*.

Aboriginal people with disability

VACCAs know from both our everyday practice, and the available evidence, that disability is a highly prevalent condition among the Aboriginal families, children and communities we work with. Many of the children and families we support are also living with complex needs that require multiple forms of specialised supports, including NDIS and disability support services. The disability space is also one where there is a lack of support and where Aboriginal clients face many barriers in accessing services, including the NDIS. Research shows that people living with a disability experience additional barriers to accessing housing including earning typically lower incomes, engage less with employment, and face stigma and discrimination in private rental markets than others.⁷⁶ These factors are exacerbated for Aboriginal people living with a disability where the intersection of health, wellbeing and social outcomes impact on them to compound disadvantage and systemic barriers to service system access and discrimination within the service system.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Groot C, Rehm I, Andrews C, Hobern B, Morgan R, Green H, Sweeney L and Blanchard M (2020). Report on Findings from the Our Turn to Speak Survey: Understanding the impact of stigma and discrimination on people living with complex mental health issues- external site opens in new window, Anne Deveson Research Centre, Melbourne.; Beer A, Baker E, Mallett S, Batterham D, Pate A and Lester, L (2012). Addressing homelessness amongst persons with a disability: Identifying and enacting best practice- external site opens in new window, report to the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHSCIA).

⁷⁷ Jeromey B. Temple, Heather Wong, Angeline Ferdinand, Scott Avery, Yin Paradies and Margaret Kelaher, 'Exposure to interpersonal racism and avoidance behaviours reported by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with a disability', *Australian Journal of Social Issues* (2020), 1-20, 9.

Recommendation:

11. That the Yoorrook Justice Commission calls on the Victorian Government to provide targeted funding to ACCOs to address the specific needs of Aboriginal people with disability, including assisting them to obtain and remain in supported housing, access the NDIS and other support as well as addressing stigma in the private rental market

Conclusion

VACCA wishes to thank the Yoorrook Justice Commission for its work thus far in uncovering and documenting systemic injustices experienced by Aboriginal peoples in Victoria, and for the opportunity to provide guidance and advice on strategies to redress these injustices.

We welcome the chance to discuss the submission in more detail.

For further information, please contact Sarah Gafforini, Director, Office of the CEO via sarahg@vacca.org.