

### Introduction

We at Cumberland Women's Health Centre are writing to you to express our grave concern about the growing number of our clients and their children who face homelessness due to domestic and family violence. More concerning are the women and children who remain in domestic violence situations due to a severe lack of affordable housing options in both the public and private rental housing sectors. This housing crisis is well documented in numerous recent government and non-government agency reports, and is a shared concern amongst many workers in welfare and community services in NSW.

### Context: Housing Shortage

Housing as shelter is a fundamental human right, yet Australia is experiencing a shortage of affordable and adequate housing. Due to the gap between supply and demand in dwellings and the increasing rental unaffordability, the situation is likely to get worse. A 2010 report by the National Housing Supply Council estimates a shortfall of 178,400 properties across Australia, a gap which is projected to grow to 308,000 within the next five years.<sup>i</sup> This is the case in both the private and public sectors. This housing shortage is most critical in NSW which accounts for almost a third of the nation's population but which is contributing less than 20% of the nation's new dwelling starts.<sup>ii</sup>

In regards to the private rental market, 31% of rental stock was affordable for low income households and only 13% was affordable for very low income households.<sup>iii</sup> Not only is the price of renting unaffordable for many Australian families, but there is increasing evidence of discrimination from real estate agents against certain groups such as single mothers receiving income support.<sup>iv</sup> Alarming, it is these women who are most in need of safe and affordable accommodation.

Often single mothers escaping domestic violence have no other option but to turn to the public housing system. As Sharam argues; "state public housing systems are full of women (most with children) reflecting the inability of these women to derive adequate incomes to provide for themselves in the private housing market."<sup>v</sup>

Furthermore, between 2000 and 2010 there was a 7.3% decrease in social housing and although the number of people on the public housing waiting list has been falling<sup>vi</sup> this does not highlight that there is a decrease in demand, but rather a result of the tightening of eligibility criteria that was announced in April 2005.<sup>vii</sup>

### Women's Housing Needs

Many recent reports alerting about the current housing crisis recognize that a large proportion of homeless people are women and children escaping domestic and family violence.<sup>viii</sup>

Despite government initiatives to address this issue with housing programs such as the Start Safely (SS) Program; The National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS); Supported Accommodation Assistance Program, (SAAP); Long term Accommodation and Support for Women and Children Experiencing Domestic and Family <sup>ix</sup> Violence Program; Safe Accommodation for Families Escaping Violence Program homelessness for women and children escaping domestic violence remains an overwhelming reality. This is due to a number of factors:

1. There is a severe shortage of public housing available, particularly for women on Centerlink benefits with a number of children requiring three – four bedroom accommodation<sup>x</sup>
2. There is an extensive waiting list for public housing within the Sydney metropolitan area <sup>xi</sup>
3. The rental market is grossly unaffordable for single mothers who are unemployed. <sup>xii</sup> Furthermore, many women escaping domestic violence suffer from post-traumatic stress symptoms and need a period of emotional recovery before being able to sustain employment. <sup>xiii</sup> Other women have small under school aged children with no family support or financial means to afford childcare that enable them to find adequate employment that would in turn enable them to afford suitable accommodation<sup>xiv</sup>
4. Rental property markets tend to discriminate against women who have children and pets<sup>xv</sup>. Additionally, real estate agents tend to be reluctant to rent properties to women on the Start Safely Program.<sup>xvi</sup>
5. Many women escaping domestic violence are ineligible for the housing assistance offered through the Private Rental Brokerage Scheme because their income is too low. <sup>xvii</sup>
6. Women's refuges are full to maximum capacity due to overload of applicants, and often do not have vacancies. Moreover, most women's refuges do not cater for women with male children 12 years and over<sup>xviii</sup>
7. Women and children escaping domestic violence are often not able to stay with family or friends because they either do not have any, or it would be an easy access for their abusive partners to further abuse them<sup>xix</sup>
8. Similarly, the Staying Home, Leaving Violence (SHLV) Program is also limited in keeping women safe from ongoing domestic violence when abusive partners often continue to harass and threaten them <sup>xx</sup>
9. Women with children experiencing domestic violence are told they are ineligible for housing assistance unless they first leave their homes, thus becoming technically homeless.<sup>xxi</sup>

10. Women with children experiencing domestic violence often remain in abusive homes as an alternative to becoming homeless.<sup>xxii</sup> This option often puts women with children at risk of further abuse as well as losing the children to Family and Community Services.<sup>xxiii</sup>

The above stresses for women and children escaping domestic violence highlight the desperate and urgent need for this target group to access affordable housing. These difficulties in attaining affordable accommodation by women experiencing domestic violence are repeatedly and increasingly reported at Cumberland Women's Health Centre and other community services.

### Impacts of Homelessness on Women and Children Experiencing Domestic Violence

The lack of affordable housing for women and children who experience domestic and family violence has detrimental effects on their overall health safety and wellbeing.

High rents in the private rental market forces many women to move to more affordable suburbs isolating them from their social networks and children's schools and community.<sup>xxiv</sup> The lack of affordable housing has even resulted in some women having to give up their children and put them into care. Such outcomes severely impacts on the women and children's capacity to cope with daily life.<sup>xxv</sup>

Women escaping domestic violence find the search for affordable accommodation a lengthy and fragmented process, exacerbated by having to relate their story/experiences over and over to authorities. This stress is compounded by women having to deal with a lack of cooking facilities in emergency budget- type motel accommodation, and uncompromising landlords who prefer working couples with no pets over single parent families on a benefit. Furthermore, these traumatized women are left to negotiate a range of already under- resourced services in an attempt to secure their own and their children's safety.

The struggle to find secure and affordable accommodation results in women experiencing high stress levels, anxiety, depression, poor memory and concentration capacities, sleeping and eating problems, chronic fatigue and other significant health issues. As a result, it is not surprising that some women believe they have no other choice but to return to their violent partners. Unfortunately this option further exacerbates these chronic health symptoms.

In some cases, women who succeed in securing private rental are often forced into debt in order to pay for every-day bills such as food and electricity. In such cases women often end up having to cut down on basic essentials such as medications, food, dental care, clothing, study towards employment, and childcare/preschool.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Often homeless women have to endure many accommodation moves. This lack of security significantly impacts on women and children's lives in a number of ways such as a loss of: material possessions; pets; community support networks; physical and mental well-being; friendships; the children's routine impacting on their healthy

psychological development; self-confidence and self-esteem; and employment opportunities.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Such debilitating effects on women and their children experiencing homelessness due to domestic violence impacts on the whole Australian community, further draining the federal and state pool of community resources.

### Recommendations

We wish to remind the Gillard Government that as a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) “Australia has legal and moral obligations to promote, protect and realise the human rights of all people.”<sup>xxviii</sup> Hence we urge the Australian Government to shift its current welfare approach of tackling homelessness to a socially inclusive Human Rights approach that prioritises the accessibility of affordable and secure housing for all Australians, especially for the most vulnerable.

We encourage the Australian Government to continue working towards its target of halving homelessness by 2020 as set out in its 2008 policy paper *‘The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness’*. We strongly believe that more could be done to achieve this goal. In particular, we would like to strongly propose that the Government:

1. Supply in the Sydney metropolitan area more public housing for low-income families. This would enable people to stay close to their support base and become thriving members of the Australian community.
2. Develop private rental policies/initiatives that are affordable and accessible to disadvantaged women and children escaping domestic violence.
3. Refine and broaden criteria of current government housing programs, enabling the most disadvantaged women and children escaping domestic violence access to affordable, stable and secure housing.

### Conclusion

We, the workers at Cumberland Women’s Health Centre applaud the genuine government initiatives that address the issue of homelessness in Australia and we are aware that you are familiar with the facts presented here. The purpose of this letter is to inform you of our grassroots experience as a service provider and to appeal for urgent action on behalf of our many clients experiencing homelessness due to domestic violence.

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<sup>i</sup> The National Housing Supply Council: 2<sup>nd</sup> State of Supply Report 2010 Cited in Saulwick, J & Moore, M. 28/04/10 ‘Sydney’s housing shortage to continue.’ *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

<sup>ii</sup> Carter, B. 30/03/10 ‘Housing shortage puts pressure on Sydney city suburbs.’ *The Australian*.

<sup>iii</sup> Shelter NSW 2010 NSW Housing Factsheet. p.9.

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- <sup>iv</sup> Forell, S. et al 2005, No home, no justice? The legal needs of homeless people in NSW, Law and Justice Foundation of NSW, Sydney 2005.
- <sup>v</sup> Sharam, A. 2010 'A predictable crisis: older, single women as the new face of homelessness'. p.8.
- <sup>vi</sup> Australian institute of health and welfare, Public rental housing 2008-09.
- <sup>vii</sup> Shelter NSW 2010 NSW Housing Factsheet. p. 11.
- <sup>viii</sup> Wesley Mission 2011, 'More than a Bed: Sydney's Homeless Families Speak Out', p.8; Homelessness Taskforce 2008, 'A national approach to reducing homelessness', p.viii; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3/05/2011, 'Families are the city's hidden homeless'; NSW Women's Refuge Movement Resource Centre 2009; Parliamentary Library Research Service 2009; Australian Human Rights Commission 2008, 'Homelessness is a human rights issue', p.4; Homelessness Australia 2010.
- <sup>ix</sup> Housing NSW 2011.
- <sup>x</sup> Wesley Mission 2011, 'More than a Bed: Sydney's Homeless Families Speak Out', pp.8,47; Sharam 2010, 'A predictable crisis: single women as the new face of homelessness', p.8.
- <sup>xi</sup> NSW Women's Refuge Movement Resource Centre 2009, pp.5, 18; Shelter NSW 2011, NSW housing Factsheet, p.1; O'Flynn, L 2011, 'Housing Affordability', p.25.
- <sup>xii</sup> Wesley Mission 2011, 'More than a Bed: Sydney's Homeless Families Speak Out', pp.26,47; NSW Women's Refuge Movement Resource Centre 2009, p.12; O'Flynn, L 2011, 'Housing Affordability', p.1.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Homelessness Taskforce 2008, 'A national approach to reducing homelessness', p.3.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Sharam 2010, 'A predictable crisis: single women as the new face of homelessness', pp.10-11.
- <sup>xv</sup> [www.rspca.org](http://www.rspca.org) viewed 17/8/11
- <sup>xvi</sup> Onley, G. April 2011, presentation on Housing NSW, OWDEVN minutes, Parramatta.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xviii</sup> NSW Women's Refuge Movement Resource Centre 2009, p.8; Rolnik, R 2011, 'Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing'.
- <sup>xix</sup> NSW Women's Refuge Movement Resource Centre 2009, p.24.
- <sup>xx</sup> NSW Women's Refuge Movement Resource Centre 2009, p.9.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Wesley Mission 2011, 'More than a Bed: Sydney's Homeless Families Speak Out', p.38.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission 2008, 'Homelessness is a human rights issue', p.4; NSW Women's Refuge Movement Resource Centre 2009, pp.17-18.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Sharam 2010, 'A predictable crisis: single women as the new face of homelessness', p.4.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> NSW Women Refuge Movement & UWS Urban Research Centre 2009, 'The Impact of housing on the lives of women and Children – Post Domestic Violence Crisis Accommodation.' p. 18
- <sup>xxv</sup> NSW Women Refuge Movement & UWS Urban Research Centre 2009, 'The Impact of housing on the lives of women and Children – Post Domestic Violence Crisis Accommodation.' p. 9
- <sup>xxvi</sup> The Salvation Army 2011. 'The Personal Impact of Australia's Current Economic Situation: A Snapshot.' p. 3.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Homelessness Taskforce 2008. 'The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness' p.3
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission 2008. 'Homelessness is a Human Rights Issue.' p.2