



McAuley Community
Services for Women
A ministry of the Sisters of Mercy

Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness

A summary of the submission by McAuley Community Services for Women, February 2020

McAuley Community Services for Women each year supports more than 1100 women and children who've experienced homelessness and family violence. Our submission: 'Cold and scary: Women's experiences of homelessness' brings to life the stories of women in their own words.

They told us about being unsafe, tired, cold, afraid and hungry; of the pain of separation from their children; of being turned away in the middle of the night; of the frustrations of an overloaded homelessness system that hinders and frustrates as much as it helps.

We asked them what worked. They had many examples of what didn't.

living in cars or caravans or sleeping rough. These are the reasons why 44% of presentations for homelessness support are because of family violence.

Homelessness brings along health concerns, poverty, and trauma. In our homeless accommodation services, 85% of women had also experienced family violence, 43% sexually abused, and more than 40% have had childhood trauma.

“ You're tired all the time, trying to figure out where to go next, how to get through the next day.

Family violence is the main driver of homelessness

As a provider of family violence support, we see women and children presenting at our crisis accommodation, sometimes in the middle of the night and without the most basic possessions — effectively homeless, because home has become unsafe. Systemic failings when they leave violent relationships mean they are then at risk of entering a cycle of insecure housing, stays in squalid and unsafe motels, couch-surfing,

McAuley has answers to homelessness

In our submission we outline how McAuley's approach features all the ingredients needed to prevent homelessness and respond effectively when it occurs. Our model was tested and validated by a Deloitte Access Economics report in late 2019. It responds to what women want: good health, safe, stable and affordable accommodation; friends, family and social connections; and the ability to work or take part in meaningful activity. McAuley's model should be fully funded and replicated throughout Victoria.

The full submission can be downloaded at www.mcauleycsw.org.au

Helen's story: 'I would not be sitting here if not for McAuley'

Helen came to Australia as a refugee in the early 1980s. Her violent husband controlled all the finances and she had no income when she and her children aged 18 and 20 fled the family home.

They approached homelessness services for help. Their experiences from that point illustrate the failures of a fragmented and unresponsive system.

They were housed alongside others who were homeless and also disturbed and violent. At another point they were sent to a location where they were supposed to be met by representative of a homelessness service, but nobody met them as had been pre-arranged. They walked dark and unfamiliar streets, with no money to phone the service or take public transport to return to the city. It turned out that the house she was sent to was a private rental which required Helen to sign a lease. She had no money or capacity to do so.

A few nights later Helen went to a police station and asked if she could just sleep in the waiting room. Again she was turned away, eventually presenting at a hospital emergency department. By now Helen was deeply traumatised and needed psychiatric treatment for several months.

Finally Helen's arduous journey to get the right help ended and she was referred to McAuley, where she was housed and helped to regain her health and to reconnect with her children. She was with us for two years and her connection continues to this day.

Key points in in our submission:

Simply providing accommodation is not the answer. Women say they are only ok if there is support as well. They place a high value on the mental health support available through McAuley and the way it recognises and responds to the trauma at the heart of their experience of homelessness.

Family violence is leading to homelessness because responses are predicated on women having to 'flee' or 'escape'. More than 50% of women report they, and not their partner, move out – becoming homeless.

A focus on women and children's right to remain 'safe at home' is needed to break the nexus between family violence and homelessness.

“ I never slept through the night. Every time a car came towards me I feared it was my husband trying to track me down.

Megan's story: 'We were all stuck and hurting'

Megan had endured a violent marriage for years. With her family all overseas, and living in a rural community, she thought the best option was to try to placate her husband and 'keep the peace.' Megan also had major health issues, having survived a serious battle with cancer which means she gets some of her nutrition through a feeding tube.

Her husband began to target her son as well, and she and her son fled. Their only option was to live in their car where she hooked up her feeding equipment, and kept her phone charged, through a power point at McDonald's.

The nearest support services were two hours away. As a New Zealander she had no access to social security payments, With only a \$300 one-off Centrelink payment, their situation was dire. They continued to live in the car while her son completed his year 12 studies.

Over the next two years, Megan and her family moved seven times, relying on food vouchers and going without medications. They were battling an ineffectual court system, with her husband breaking the intervention order 13 times. He had also withdrawn all the family's money from their joint bank account, and in fact, Megan was left with a debt she had little hope of ever paying back.

Eventually Megan found McAuley. 'McAuley had all the pieces of the puzzle to give us the right help. We received specialist counselling, helping us process all that had happened. And we were referred to McAuley's partner WEstjustice who within days organised the waiver of the bank debt which had caused so many years of blood sweat and tears.

'We got through, but for so long we were in limbo. You can't move on with your life, unless everything is connected.'

Key points in in our submission:

Legal, financial, and health responses are all built into the McAuley approach, making it easier for women to recover fully and then sustain independent housing.

We are seeing increasing numbers of women (20 per cent) with no income. They are at extreme risk of sexual and other forms of exploitations. Homelessness services such as ours are 'picking up the tab' for those ineligible for government services.

McAuley's focus on the wellbeing of children and young people can help deal with the trauma and impact of family violence, and avoid the risk that later on, they too become homeless.

An artificial distinction between family violence and homelessness entry points means women can fall through the cracks and not get the help they need.

“ A woman and her children were unable to get family violence support because they were seen as no longer in danger as their husband/father – who'd burnt their house down – was in custody.

Summary of recommendations

More housing solutions

1. Invest in affordable, public and social housing to prevent homelessness
2. Fully fund and replicate the McAuley approach to solving homelessness
 - apply a gender lens to recognise women's different needs when designing homelessness supports and systems
3. Boost crisis accommodation capacity and provide integrated support at both entry and exit points.

Address factors placing children and young people at risk of homelessness

1. Adopt the goals of the Homestretch campaign so that young people do not exit state care at 18
2. Respond to the trauma of children who have been exposed to family violence by adopting McAuley's approach including infant-led practice, play therapy, access to counselling and educational support
3. Ensure crisis accommodation and refuges are available to children including males up to the age of 18
4. Apply 'Safe and together' principles to child protection practice so that responsibility for keeping children safe is not unfairly targeted at the mother only.

“ To end homelessness, we need to see it as normal – a community responsibility – for women and children to return home safely after family violence, with the perpetrator excluded with whatever legal, security and policing protections are necessary.

Address systemic failures and blockages

1. Support innovation, planning, collaboration by adopting the Productivity Commission recommendations family and community services contracts be set to seven years
2. Recognise the intersectionality of homelessness, family violence and mental health and end cost shifting from mental health to homelessness.

End the link between family violence and homelessness

1. Prioritise women's ability to remain safely home by adopting the four pillars:
 - focus on maximising women's safety using all available legal and policing strategies
 - a coordinated response involving partnerships between local services
 - ensure women are informed about their housing options before the time of crisis and at separation, and support women to maintain their housing afterwards
 - recognise the importance of enhancing women's economic security.
2. Introduce a baseline measure of 'safe at home' as a way of measuring improved outcomes in eradicating family violence
3. End the use of motel accommodation as a crisis option
4. Integrate legal help and financial case work into family violence responses
5. Support the unique value of employment support within a family violence service by adopting more flexible targets and more realistic definitions of outcomes.

Invest in mental health care in the community

Recognise and support the importance of mental health care in the community

- Build greater awareness of, and invest in early intervention around the trauma experienced by women and children who have faced family violence and homelessness
- End the cap on Federally funded CAREinMIND counselling sessions for women and children experiencing complex trauma.

Eliminate access barriers

1. Retain specialised women's services
2. End artificial distinctions between family violence and homelessness entry points and respond to the needs of the woman and children as they present
3. Recognise that women without visas or citizenship status should be eligible for homelessness support as a basic human right
4. Provide homelessness and family violence support services with specific funding to support women without visas or citizenship status, in recognition of the extra costs incurred in supporting them, for as long as it takes for them to be granted welfare benefits.