



# **10-Year Social and Affordable Housing Strategy for Victoria**

**Mental Health Victoria's submission**

**April 2021**

## **1. About Mental Health Victoria**

Mental Health Victoria (MHV) is the peak body for the mental health sector in Victoria. Our members include consumer and carer groups, community health and mental health services, hospitals, medical associations and colleges, police and emergency services associations, unions, local governments, and other bodies across the health and related sectors.

Our aim is to ensure that people living with mental illness can access the care they need, when and where they need it. Our view is that all Australians should have access to a core suite of services that they can choose from – be they delivered in the home, the community, or in the hospital.

## **2. About this submission**

In preparing this submission, MHV has consulted with housing peak bodies, mental health organisations and the Victorian Mental Health Policy Network (VMHPN). The VMHPN is a network of over 40 peak bodies from across the mental health and intersecting sectors.

Input into this submission included feedback from the following organisations:

- Carers Victoria
- Community Housing Industry Association
- Council to Homeless Persons
- Mental Health Legal Centre
- Mind Australia
- Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists
- Victorian Council of Social Service
- Victorian Public Tenants Association.

### 3. Introduction

Mental Health Victoria (MHV) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Victorian Government's 10-Year Social and Affordable Housing Strategy (the Strategy).

MHV commends the Victorian Government's commitment to build a social and affordable housing system where all Victorians have access to safe, secure and appropriate housing. Housing is fundamental to good mental health and wellbeing, and the Strategy has the potential to bring about crucial change for countless Victorians.

Housing, mental health and homelessness are intrinsically linked. Stable housing is critical to reduce the risk of mental health issues, and can bring a sense of purpose, community and opportunity. At the same time, mental health supports are vital to helping people obtain and maintain stable housing. People with a current mental health issue are one of the largest client groups accessing homelessness services (30% of all clients), as well as one of the fastest growing groups.<sup>1</sup>

Now is a critical time for mental health and housing as the Victorian mental health system faces major reform. The final report from the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System paves the way for momentous change in how mental health services across Victoria are designed and delivered. The current development of the Strategy is therefore a vital opportunity to ensure the Victorian housing and mental health systems work well together for those who need them.

While the Royal Commission's recognition of the housing needs of people with mental health issues is welcome, it alone is not enough to ensure people with concurrent mental health and housing needs receive the full range of supports they need to recover. To do this, specific reforms within the housing sector are required to better support the 30% of housing service recipients with current experiences of mental health issues.

MHV therefore recommends that the Strategy strengthen its focus on mental health and wellbeing by incorporating the following actions:

- 1. Establish strong linkages between housing services and the mental health system**, including referral pathways and shared care arrangements with the new Local Mental Health and Wellbeing Services.
- 2. Provide transitional housing** as required for people being discharged from hospitals, correctional facilities or institutional care.
- 3. Establish connections between housing services and community collectives** pursuant to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System.
- 4. Invest in a diversity of housing supports, stocks, models and programs** to deliver a broad range of housing options for people with mental health issues.
- 5. Establish ongoing collaboration and consultation** mechanisms to incorporate lived experience expertise and knowledge, including with consumers, carers, and key population groups.
- 6. Link the housing and mental health sectors through whole-of-government structures** pursuant to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System.
- 7. Train and upskill the housing workforce on mental health and wellbeing issues.**

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020, *Specialist homelessness services annual report*.

#### **4. Pathways**

To ensure that people can access pathways to and between relevant supports, the Strategy must ensure robust linkages between the mental health, housing and related systems, including institutional settings. Currently, there is too little connection between mental health service providers and the housing system. Too often, this leaves consumers and carers unsupported when facing mental health and housing crises, and unaware of the supports that are available to them.

The Royal Commission has recommended the establishment of 50 to 60 Local Mental Health and Wellbeing Services by 2026.<sup>2</sup> Local access to the mental health system will be facilitated through these services which people will be able to access directly on a walk-in basis, or via referral. Housing services must be linked in to this new system to ensure that people with concurrent mental health and housing needs can access pathways between relevant mental health and housing supports as required.

Further on this, people in institutional settings often lack ready access to transitional housing and adequate mental health supports when discharged. Without access to relevant supports, people can quickly find themselves cycling through mental health crises, homelessness and/or prison. It is essential that these supports are accessible upon discharge to prevent the development of further mental health and/or housing issues.

Mental Health Victoria recommends that the Strategy should:

- Establish strong linkages between housing services and the mental health system, including referral pathways and shared care arrangements with the new Local Mental Health and Wellbeing Services.
- Provide transitional housing as required for people being discharged from hospitals, correctional facilities or institutional care.

#### **5. Communities**

Healthy communities are fundamental to supporting good mental health and wellbeing. Belonging to a community is particularly important for people with mental health issues in fostering social connection, promoting help seeking and reducing feelings of isolation.

To support good mental health and wellbeing in local communities, the Royal Commission recommended the establishment of 'community collectives' in each local government area. These community collectives will provide a unique platform for the Strategy to connect housing services with communities to support mental health and wellbeing.

Mental Health Victoria recommends that the Strategy should:

- Establish connections between housing services and community collectives pursuant to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System.

#### **6. Growth**

Increased investment is required to supply a range of housing options to support people with concurrent mental health and housing issues. This requires taking account of different support needs, and how that changes over time. This is particularly important for people with mental health issues who have a range of different needs and requirements which often fluctuate over time.

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<sup>2</sup> Recommendation 3(2)(a).

The Royal Commission made a welcome recommendation to grow supported housing options for adults and young people living with mental health issues.<sup>3</sup> However, the Royal Commission also recognised that supported housing places alone are not enough, further recommending that people with mental health issues be prioritised in both the Strategy and the Victorian Housing Register. For this to result in meaningful change, broad sector growth is required to ensure that people with mental health issues are able to access a range of housing options suitable for their needs through these prioritised pathways.

Mental Health Victoria recommends that the Strategy should:

- Invest in a diversity of housing supports, stocks, models and programs to deliver a broad range of appropriate and sustainable housing options for people with mental health issues, including:
  - targeted growth across social housing (community and public housing)
  - tenancy support programs for those who are at risk of homelessness
  - Private Rental Assistance Program for people with mental health issues, as outlined in the Final Report into the Inquiry into Homelessness<sup>4</sup>
  - trial programs that integrate housing and mental health supports
  - housing supports at points of transition.

## 7. Partnerships

For the Strategy to achieve its vision, people will need to work together at all levels of government, service and community.

On a community level, the housing system can benefit immensely from lived experience participation and leadership across all parts of the system including service delivery, research, policy and governance. People with lived experience, both carers and consumers, have knowledge and expertise that is vital to improving and strengthening systems. By putting lived experience at the centre of designing and delivering the housing system, we can ensure the system meets the needs of the people and communities it is designed to serve.

To ensure the Strategy meets the needs of all people, housing solutions must also take into account diversity and the need for tailored approaches. This will require ongoing consultation with key population groups to ensure that diverse community needs are understood and accounted for.

On a government level, the integration of the mental health and housing service sectors will be important to ensure planning, governance and oversight of both systems are coherent with each other. The Royal Commission has recommended the establishment of whole-of-government structures including several interdepartmental committees<sup>5</sup> which provide significant opportunities to support integration at a governmental level.

At a service level, partnerships between services will also be integral. In addition to creating and strengthening pathways between support services, upskilling and training the housing workforce on mental health and wellbeing issues will be critical to ensuring the housing sector has the capabilities required to understand and respond to the needs and concerns of people with concurrent mental health and housing issues.

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<sup>3</sup> Recommendation 25.

<sup>4</sup> Parliament of Victoria, Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee 2021, *Inquiry into homelessness in Victoria*.

<sup>5</sup> Recommendation 46

Mental Health Victoria recommends that the Strategy should:

- Establish ongoing collaboration and consultation mechanisms to incorporate lived experience expertise and knowledge, including with consumers, carers, and key population groups, including:
  - people with psychosocial and/or other forms of disability
  - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
  - people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities
  - LGBTIQ+ people
  - young people
  - older people
  - regional and rural communities
  - people escaping domestic violence.
- Link the housing and mental health sectors through whole-of-government structures pursuant to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System.
- Train and upskill the housing workforce on mental health and wellbeing issues.

## 8. Conclusion

The Victorian Government's 10-Year Social and Affordable Housing Strategy presents an exciting opportunity to better the lives of Victorians with housing needs. At the same time, the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System will bring about one of the largest social reforms and transformations of mental health service delivery in Victoria.

Capitalising on these significant opportunities has the potential to deliver significant change for Victorians with concurrent mental health and housing needs. For the Strategy to meaningfully capitalise on these significant opportunities, the relationship between housing and mental health must be recognised as a priority.

Mental Health Victoria therefore recommends that the 10-Year Social and Affordable Housing Strategy be developed with a specific priority on mental health and wellbeing, incorporating each of the seven actions identified above.

MHV again thanks the Victorian Government for the opportunity to contribute to this vital piece of work, and welcomes any further opportunity to provide more detailed advice.

For further information on this submission, please contact Larissa Taylor, Director of Policy, on (03) 9519 7000 or [l.taylor@mhvic.org.au](mailto:l.taylor@mhvic.org.au).

Yours sincerely,



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Mental Health Victoria