

# Securing safer housing for people experiencing domestic and family violence



Australian Housing  
and Urban Research Institute

## Based on AHURI Final Report No. 311:

Housing outcomes after domestic and family violence

### What this research is about

**This research examines how housing support for vulnerable families can best be integrated with other forms of support to improve safety and wellbeing. It reviewed the legislative framework, key documents, strategies, governance arrangements and major initiatives related to domestic and family violence (DFV) in each state and territory, together with interviews with policy, service delivery and industry stakeholders and users to better understand integration of support services.**

### The context of this research

With the relationship between DFV and homelessness well recognised, Council of Australian Governments has adopted a national strategy on preventing violence against women and children (*National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children 2010–2022*). All state and territory jurisdictions have implemented strategic frameworks to ensure support for victims is consistent, coordinated and comprehensive.

Despite this, the proportion of Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) clients experiencing DFV has grown steadily from 32 per cent of all clients in 2012–13 to 40 per cent in 2016–17 (from 77,870 clients to 114,757 nationally). In 2016–17, 39 per cent of these clients were homeless at the beginning of their 'support period', and 61 per cent were considered at risk of homelessness.

### The key findings

This research found in most cases the immediate response to DFV is effective

and timely, although constrained by resources and growing demand. The main challenge facing services and their clients is the lack of pathways by which women can move on from crisis and transitional responses into secure, long-term housing.

#### Integrated service delivery

Governments around Australia have adopted strategic responses to DFV that promote integrated service delivery for affected families. Generally this integrated response is working well, promoting collaborative working relationships amongst services and providing support that is valued and appreciated by service users.

Interviews with service users and service providers indicated that at a day-to-day practice level, integration is less about specific initiatives or programs and more about the maintenance of productive, mutually-supportive working relationships between agencies and/or workers.

For service users, support from a capable, caring and well-connected case worker is crucial. A number of participants had experienced rudeness, disrespect or a lack of empathy from

frontline workers in non-DFV services, and this actively discouraged them from approaching those services again for help.

Gaps in the current system include inadequate legal assistance; delays in access to counselling and other services; and constraints on the length of time women can receive intensive assistance.

“Services do appear able to move people who are entirely without shelter into some kind of housing, but few of these clients are moving into stable, long-term, appropriate accommodation.”

#### Pathways out of crisis housing

Data suggests Specialist Homelessness Services, which provide the principal crisis response for women

and children who leave their home due to violence, can do little to provide a pathway from crisis into stable, secure and long-term accommodation. Without an adequate supply of affordable, suitable housing moving from short-term or transitional accommodation into permanent, independent housing is very difficult, and sometimes unachievable.

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### Private rental housing

To alleviate pressure on the social housing system, governments have developed specific subsidies or programs available to assist people escaping DFV to access private rental housing, including the Rent Choice Start Safely subsidy in NSW (which includes assistance with bond and ongoing rental subsidies for a period of up to three years) and the Rapid Rehousing head-leasing program in Tasmania. This program entails a \$10,000 subsidy per head-leased property to community housing providers, with the funding to be used to assist with costs, including rent or security upgrades, for up to 12 months.

Families may also be eligible for state-based bond assistance programs, and Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) at the national level. This support is valuable in certain markets, giving women a degree of choice and flexibility and access to a greater portion of the market than they would otherwise have had. However, in other markets, where rents are high and climbing, the assistance is insufficient to effectively alleviate the cost of rent or make housing of adequate size and quality available. Even if housing is affordable with the subsidy, once the subsidised period ends, the unsubsidised rent becomes unsustainable.

Women leaving violence may also face discrimination from landlords, or be unable to effectively compete with childless, working couples in tight

markets where landlords can choose from a large number of prospective tenants. This can be compounded if they have a poor tenancy record due to the behaviour of a violent ex-partner, or are stigmatised due to receipt of a government-funded housing subsidy.

### Government policy and practice

Some government policies and practices could be improved to better support the needs of people trying to leave violent relationships. In particular, the research identified:

- inadequate income support payments can leave women and children living in poverty and unable to afford decent housing
- limited protection and assistance for migrant women sponsored to come to Australia by men who later become violent and abusive
- challenges at the intersection point between the child protection and family violence systems, particularly where lack of housing prevents women from regaining custody of children taken into statutory care
- Family Court decisions can trap some women in unaffordable housing markets in order to enable their violent ex-partner to continue to have access to children
- integration may be ineffective when it results in the dilution of specialist expertise and experience, and it can be difficult to achieve in small rural communities where there is limited availability and coverage of critical services, including police.

### Safety

Where safe, secure and affordable housing is not available, women may decide to return to a violent relationship because they perceive this as a safer option than the alternatives. Table 1 shows that, when considered by their first reported housing situation, the percentage who end up well housed is in almost all cases relatively small.

The shortage of affordable housing means women can feel pressured to accept accommodation that is substandard, too far from critical

support networks or located in neighbourhoods or settings that feel unsafe or are unsafe. Housing choices may be further constrained by the actions of a perpetrator who continues to harass the victim.

If women reject a housing offer due to fear, trauma or a desire to provide appropriate living conditions for their children, this can be perceived by services or defined within policies as declining support or failing to engage, which has ramifications for future offers.

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### Legislative responses to DFV

States and territories are adopting integrated responses to DFV, although this is applied in various ways and at various levels. Broad themes include governance models that explicitly draw different perspectives and responsibilities together and service provision that emphasises connected approaches to service delivery, such as single contact points, case conferencing, the coordination of support provision by local ‘hubs’ and multi-disciplinary or ‘wraparound’ delivery. In certain areas of policy, there is a push for uniformity within and between jurisdictions, such as risk assessment, practice standards and the administration of protection orders.

The existing Legislative and strategic responses to DFV in Australian jurisdictions are outlined in Table 2.

**Table 1: Final housing situation by initial housing situation, numbers of clients and as a percentage of total**

Initial housing situation	Final housing situation					Total
	Institution	Not housed	Poorly housed	Well housed	Status uncertain	
Institution	149 (28.3%)	20 (3.8%)	148 (28.0%)	97 (18.3%)	114 (21.6%)	528 (100%)
Not housed	18 (1.0%)	485 (28.1%)	507 (29.3%)	400 (23.2%)	318 (18.4%)	1,728 (100%)
Poorly housed	134 (0.7%)	271 (1.4%)	7,875 (41.5%)	4,635 (24.4%)	6,056 (31.9%)	18,970 (100%)
Well housed	3 (0.1%)	4 (0.2%)	134 (6.0%)	1,532 (69.3%)	539 (24.4%)	2,212 (100%)
Status Uncertain	75 (0.3%)	172 (0.6%)	2,155 (7.4%)	11,292 (38.8%)	15,396 (52.9%)	29,089 (100%)
<b>Total</b>	379 (0.7%)	952 (1.8%)	10,818 (20.6%)	17,955 (34.2%)	22,422 (42.7%)	52,527 (100%)

Notes: Data is national, for 2016–17, for female clients aged 18 and over for whom domestic violence was a reason for seeking assistance and for whom the support period had closed.

Source: Calculated by the authors from AIHW Specialist Homelessness Services Data Cubes

**Table 2: Legislative and strategic responses to domestic and family violence in Australian jurisdictions**

Jurisdiction	Legislation	Strategies
Commonwealth	<i>Family Law Act 1975</i>	<i>National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children 2010–2022</i>  Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia
New South Wales	<i>Crimes (Domestic and Personal Violence) Act 2007</i>  <i>Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998</i>	<i>It Stops Here: Standing together to end domestic and family violence Framework for Reform</i>  <i>NSW Domestic and Family Violence Blueprint for Reform: Safer Lives for Women, Men and Children</i>  <i>NSW Domestic and Family Violence Prevention and Early Intervention Strategy 2017–2021</i>  <i>NSW Domestic Violence Justice Strategy: Improving the NSW Criminal Justice System's Response to Domestic Violence 2013–2017</i>
Victoria	<i>Family Violence Protection Act 2008</i>  <i>Children, Youth and Families Act 2005</i>	<i>Ending Family Violence: Victoria's Plan for Change</i>  <i>Family Violence Rolling Action Plan 2017–2020</i>  <i>Free from violence: Victoria's strategy to prevent family violence and all forms of violence against women</i>
Queensland	<i>Domestic and Family Violence Protection Act 2012</i>  <i>Child Protection Act 1999</i>	<i>Queensland says: not now, not ever. Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Strategy 2016–2026</i>  <i>Second Action Plan of the Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Strategy 2016–17 to 2018–19</i>  <i>Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Engagement and Communication Strategy 2016–2026</i>
Western Australia	<i>Restraining Orders Act 1997</i>  <i>Children and Community Services Act 2004</i>	<i>Freedom from Fear Action Plan 2015: Working towards the elimination of family and domestic violence in Western Australia</i>  <i>WA's Family and Domestic Violence Prevention Strategy to 2022: Creating safer communities</i>
South Australia	<i>Intervention Orders (Prevention of Abuse) Act 2009</i>  <i>Children and Young People (Safety) Act 2017</i>	<i>A right to safety: the next phase of South Australia's Women's Safety Strategy, 2011–2022</i>  <i>Taking a Stand: Responding to Domestic Violence</i>
Tasmania	<i>Family Violence Act 2004</i>  <i>Children, Young Persons and their Families Act 2005</i>	<i>Safety is Everyone's Right: NT Domestic and Family Violence Reduction Strategy 2014–2017</i>  <i>Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Framework (under development)</i>
Northern Territory	<i>Domestic and Family Violence Act 2007</i>  <i>Care and Protection of Children Act 2007</i>	<i>Safety is Everyone's Right: NT Domestic and Family Violence Reduction Strategy 2014–2017</i>  <i>Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Framework (under development)</i>
Australian Capital Territory	<i>Family Violence Act 2016</i>  <i>Children and Young People Act 2008</i>	<i>Prevention of Violence Against Women and Children Strategy 2011–2017</i>  <i>ACT Government Response to Family Violence</i>

Source: Authors. Compiled as part of desktop policy review undertaken during research.

## What this research means for policy makers

People experiencing DFV need a broad range of interventions, including housing support. Refuges, shelters and transitional accommodation are vital immediate responses and provide valuable support for many families, but the lack of secure, affordable and permanent housing is a systemic issue. To meet the needs of vulnerable families, greater investment is needed in a range of affordable housing options that are planned and designed to be safe, secure and supportive as well as affordable in the long term. Pathways from crisis accommodation, including long term private rental options, social or affordable housing, or safe at home initiatives are required.

Previous research demonstrates that the effectiveness of housing support in promoting safety and wellbeing for victims, including children, is affected by the provision of other types of help, especially in education, training and employment. In addition, 'integrative' models of housing support, like 'safe at home' programs, have been found to have a particularly important role in preventing DFV-related homelessness.

The operation of integration programs varies widely, however there are common elements:

- an interagency model enabling case coordination, information sharing or multi-disciplinary service delivery
- the involvement of the police as either lead or partner agency
- the inclusion of measures to address housing issues, such as a safe at home model
- multi-agency risk assessment and safety planning for victims.

Successful implementation requires 'time, resources and commitment' to achieve success, including purposive processes and mechanisms to build and maintain relationships. One of the most important service delivery priority is 'empowerment'—defined as 'being heard and believed, regaining autonomy and agency of one's own life, realising your choices and recognising and defining abuse and control.'

## Methodology

This research undertook a desktop policy review which mapped the legislative, policy and service landscape relating to DFV in each state and territory, and interviewed, in New South Wales and Tasmania, women who left their homes due to DFV and policy, service delivery and industry stakeholders.

## Further information

### TO CITE THE AHURI RESEARCH, PLEASE REFER TO:

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