



# Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Limited

Submission to the Victorian Government's 10 Year Social and  
Affordable Housing Strategy

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On behalf of Linda Bamblett

### **Note on language**

We use the term ‘Aboriginal’ to describe people who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

### **About VACSAL**

VACSAL is a state-wide agency that provides advice to Government on a range of community issues, as well as being a major provider of extensive services to the Aboriginal community. VACSAL supports and assists children, young people and families as well as strengthening communities and culture, servicing the Metropolitan Melbourne as well as some regional communities.

Established in 1984, VACSAL has been instrumental in assisting the Victorian and Commonwealth Government develop policies and programs in major areas relating to the advancement of Aboriginal people. VACSAL is seen as key advocate that has representation on over 85 local, regional and State reference/advisory committees. As an Aboriginal community service organisation, we are committed to:

- A commitment to self-determination and self-management for Aboriginal communities
- Advocating for the needs of individuals, families and communities.
- A respect for and acknowledgement of Aboriginal history and kinship networks.
- The delivery of high-quality services.
- Creating an organisation that is open, welcoming and one which encourages participation by the Aboriginal community.
- Redressing inequality and disadvantage

VACSAL has been providing homeless services for over 30 years and has developed considerable expertise in the sector, as well as the trust of the Aboriginal community.

### **Introduction**

VACSAL welcomes the opportunity to provide input into Victoria’s 10-year Strategy for Social and Affordable Housing. VACSAL supports an integrated approach and welcomes the Victorian Government’s commitment to engaging with the community to develop this strategy. Social and affordable housing is integral to support the rapidly growing Aboriginal community, create pathways out of homelessness and work toward closing the gap. VACSAL welcomes Victoria’s *Big Housing Build* the state government’s commitment of 10 per cent of housing dedicated to the Aboriginal community. This unique commitment to social and affordable housing marks the beginning of a path out of Victoria’s housing crisis and VACSAL recommends further investment to continue past the initial four year agreement and \$5.3 billion investment.

It should be noted that the Social and Affordable Housing discussion paper does not mention Aboriginal people, or the Victorian Aboriginal Community’s Housing and Homelessness Framework, Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort. The Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort Framework was developed by the Aboriginal community for the community, and provides a 20 year agenda to guide work in housing for Aboriginal people. VACSAL strongly supports the Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort framework and advocates for all recommendations under the framework to be embedded into the Social and Affordable Housing Strategy.

## **Growth, Service Demand and Engagement**

Safe and secure housing plays a key role in successful outcomes across health, education, justice, child protection and employment. Currently, the significant lack of social and affordable housing in Victoria coupled with intersecting barriers faced by Aboriginal people has led to a housing crisis. Intersecting barriers mean Aboriginal Victorians' experience homelessness at much higher rates than the rest of the community, with 17,000 Aboriginal people accessing homeless services per 100,000 - the highest rates nationwide.<sup>1</sup> 44 per cent of Aboriginal people who access homeless services are already homeless, and the number of Aboriginal people accessing homelessness services has increased by 25% since 2013/2014.<sup>2</sup> The Aboriginal population in Victoria is rapidly expanding and data commissioned by the Aboriginal Executive Council (AEC) found that the Aboriginal population is estimated to grow by 48 per cent in 2028, with demand for health and social services forecast to rise correspondingly across all sectors<sup>3</sup>.

The need for homelessness support services by Aboriginal people is projected to rise by more than 50 per cent over the next 10 years, rising faster than population growth, due to current trends and policy context.<sup>4</sup> At current growth rates, Aboriginal people will access homelessness services nearly 15,000 times in 2028<sup>5</sup>. At present, the only housing target under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (CtG), Target 9: *By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in appropriately sized (not overcrowded) housing to 88 per cent* has already been achieved in Victoria and is not nearly ambitious enough or appropriate to close the gap in disadvantage<sup>6</sup>. The Social and Affordable housing strategy should recognise that Aboriginal communities and ACCOs should be empowered to design and evaluate housing targets for Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal population growth varies across regions, with Western Melbourne and Bayside Peninsula expected to have the highest populations of Aboriginal people by 2028<sup>7</sup>. 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<sup>8</sup>. 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<sup>9</sup>. Correspondingly, access to social and affordable housing should be prioritised in these growth corridors of both population and increased service demand to ensure Aboriginal families have access to safe, secure and affordable housing. In conjunction with prioritising growth corridors and service demand, implementation of the strategy must be driven by a commitment towards Aboriginal self-determination. Implementation will be strengthened by ongoing consultation with the Aboriginal community and ACCOs, and a formalised mechanism for shared decision-making. The strategy must have an independent review and accountability mechanism for the 10-year period, allowing for the opportunity to re-evaluate and prioritise goals and objectives.

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<sup>1</sup> AIHW. (2018). Housing assistance in Australia. Canberra: Australian Government

<sup>2</sup> SVA Consulting, *Demand for services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria* (Report prepared for the Aboriginal Executive Council), 2019, <https://aal.org.au/wp-content/uploads/AEC-SVA-Service-Demand-forecasting-report-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> ibid

<sup>4</sup> ibid

<sup>5</sup> ibid

<sup>6</sup> Commonwealth of Australia. (2020). Closing the Gap Report 2020.

<https://ctgreport.niaa.gov.au/sites/default/files/pdf/closing-the-gapreport-2020.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> SVA Consulting, *Demand for services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in*

<sup>8</sup> ibid

<sup>9</sup> ibid

## **People, Partnerships and Pathways**

VACSAL has a unique understanding of the needs of Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness and housing stress, having developed considerable expertise in this sector over the last 30 years. VACSAL supports Aboriginal people experiencing housing stress related to family violence, mental and physical illness, alcohol and other drug use and past trauma in the Northern Metropolitan region. VACSAL is the only Aboriginal organisation that sits on the Homeless Emergency Accommodation Response Team (HEART) governance group and priority List Group in the north and participates in working groups and forums across the sector. Prior to COVID-19 the capacity of the Northern Metropolitan Region homelessness service system was very limited, being able to support approximately 11 per cent of households seeking assistance.<sup>10</sup> There has historically been a severe lack of transitional housing, emergency accommodation and housing support options for single people, young people, people with no income and people leaving prison.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, emergency housing became more widely available due to the collapse of the tourism sector and resulting availability of bought hotel accommodation.<sup>11</sup> With the increased availability of bought hotel accommodation and partnerships within the homelessness sector during COVID-19, an increased amount of rough sleepers who had experienced complex barriers to accessing housing were able to be navigated into the housing system. The Social and Affordable housing strategy must include housing options for this cohort and ensure people have access to emergency and transitional housing to avoid sleeping rough for extended periods of time.

Aboriginal people who have been sleeping rough for an extended period of time who have multiple related issues such as mental and physical illness, alcohol and other drug use issues and past trauma, are unlikely to successfully negotiate and sustain a pathway out of chronic homelessness without intensive resources and ongoing support. During the pandemic, the coordinated and localised response of the HEART governance group ensured clients in emergency housing had access to intensive case management and were able to continue to be housed. The Social and Affordable housing strategy should plan strategies for Aboriginal people experiencing housing difficulties to be supported to navigate integrated housing support pathways, and have knowledge of access points. ACCO's should be managing Aboriginal people's needs and self-determination should be at the centre of decision making for Aboriginal people.

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<sup>10</sup> Kelly, David, *NLASN Homelessness Response to COVID-19 (RMIT University)*, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*

### **Overarching Recommendations:**

VACSAL urges the Victorian Government to:

1. Embed the Mana-na woorn-tyeen maar-takoort framework and all recommendations into the Social and Affordable Housing Strategy;
2. Undertake a joint development of the strategy with ACCOs, prioritising self-determination and Aboriginal-led decision making;
3. Ensure rates of Aboriginal homelessness are reduced by 10 per cent per annum for the next ten years;
4. Find initiatives that increase the number of Aboriginal people employed in the housing sector as an aspect of equal opportunity and self-determination;
5. Support Aboriginal-led monitoring of outcome indicators around rates of homelessness, insecure and temporary housing for Aboriginal peoples compared to non-Aboriginal people;
6. Support Aboriginal-led monitoring of performance indicators around new culturally appropriate housing stock built and renewal and renovation of current stock for Aboriginal communities;
7. Create an Aboriginal access point in the North East region that has access to an allocation of Housing Establishment Funds to provide crisis accommodation for Aboriginal people. Resourcing the access point with transitional housing stock, tenancy management staff and IAP staff will enable a fully functioning access point that works collaboratively with mainstream access points across the region/s for Aboriginal people;
8. Increase funding for Aboriginal culturally appropriate social housing, transitional and crisis housing options, with a specific focus on one or two-bedroom dwellings;
9. Focus social and affordable housing in Aboriginal population growth corridors and areas of high family service demand;
10. Implement an independent Aboriginal review and accountability mechanism for the 10-year period, allowing for the opportunity to re-evaluate and prioritise goals and objectives.

VACSAL looks forward to working with the Victorian Government to ensure these important reforms take place. For more information please contact:

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