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Aboriginal Housing Victoria (AHV) is a not-for-profit registered Housing Provider and is the largest Aboriginal housing organisation in Victoria. AHV manages a portfolio of 1522 properties, 73 of which we own. The remainder are leased from the Victorian Government through the Director of Housing.

AHV provides housing to approximately 4,000 low income Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Victorians in 1,522 properties, representing 8% of the Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.¹²

All of AHV's tenants have low incomes and are either wholly or partly dependent on income security payments from Centrelink, or on relatively low incomes from employment. Unlike many Victorian community housing agencies, AHV provides housing services throughout metropolitan and regional Victoria to a discrete client group. AHV manages tenancies across metropolitan and regional Victoria with the largest number in the Loddon Mallee (302), Gippsland (219), Hume (198) and the northern (187) and southern (167) Melbourne metropolitan areas.

AHV's mix of tenants encompasses all age groups and family types, including young singles, older people and families with children. AHV predominantly provides larger family accommodation units due to the kinship nature of the Aboriginal community resulting in larger households. However, there is an increasing demand for smaller accommodation and singles accommodation.

AHV's tenants are some of the most disadvantaged people in Victoria.³

It is widely acknowledged that the Aboriginal population is significantly more disadvantaged than the broader Victorian population. Education and economic outcomes for Aboriginal people are far lower than for the general population. Aboriginal people have lower levels of formal education, higher rates of unemployment, lower rates of economic participation and proportionally lower incomes. Aboriginal households are twice as likely to receive Commonwealth Rental Assistance. Rates of involvement with the child protection system and the criminal justice system are much higher all the way through both systems, from first contact to child removal and incarceration respectively.

The Aboriginal population has experienced significantly higher rates of child removal than the broader population. The mothers of Aboriginal children give birth at an earlier age and have more children. The Aboriginal population experiences greater rates of family breakdown and as a consequence children are more frequently raised in single parent families. The Aboriginal population experiences greater rates of drug and alcohol dependency, mental health issues and family violence.

¹ References hereafter to Aboriginal refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

² ABS 3238.0.55.001 – Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, June 2011.

³ See generally Productivity Commission, 2014, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Key Indicators 2014 Report*, and , Office of Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, *Victorian Government Aboriginal Affairs Report 2013*, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Victorian Government

The disadvantage of Aboriginal Victorians is also reflected in housing outcomes. A greater proportion of Aboriginal people are homeless and rates of home ownership are far lower.

Demand for social housing is likely to continue to increase. Victoria's Aboriginal population is young and growing fast. In 2014 the population had reached almost 50,000⁴, slightly less than 1 percent of the State's total population. Between the 2006 and 2011 censuses, the Victorian Aboriginal population grew by 26 percent with an average annual growth rate of 4.7 percent compared to only 1.7 percent for the general community.

The sheer increase in growth of the Aboriginal population and the associated housing need suggest that Aboriginal homelessness and housing outcomes are likely to deteriorate or at least not improve and more Aboriginal people will make their way into social and public housing.

Aboriginal Victorians already are far more likely to rent and to be housed in social housing. Currently 22 percent of Victorian Aboriginal households⁵ are in social or public housing. This is likely to represent greater than 22 percent of the Aboriginal population because the housing stock is oriented more to families than singles.

The implication is that the Aboriginal Victorians with the lowest incomes and the greatest levels of disadvantage are likely to be concentrated in social housing tenancies and this concentration is likely to increase over time. This is particularly the case in AHV's tenancies.

The level of disadvantage of AHV tenants has implications for how we provide services and how we support our tenants.

AHV's housing services are targeted to those most in need of support. AHV provides our tenants with an Aboriginal landlord and personalised and culturally sensitive services for Aboriginal people.

The efficient and effective delivery of our housing services relies on effective support for our tenants. To be effective the supports must address individual tenants' underlying needs, and in an aggregate sense, the disadvantage of Aboriginal tenants.

Increasingly AHV is considering how our housing service contributes to the bigger picture of addressing Aboriginal disadvantage. This means looking beyond how our housing service contributes to reducing homelessness for Aboriginal people and other housing outcomes. We are also looking at how our role in providing tenants with stable housing can contribute to tenants improving their life circumstances and in turn how that relates to 'closing the gap' in Aboriginal outcomes.

It is in this context that we have concerns with the impact of family violence. We are concerned that family violence both leads to homelessness and undermines tenants' efforts to improve their lives and the lives of their children.

It is our belief that family violence is a significant cause of homelessness for Aboriginal people and of housing instability. Further, that family violence, often in concert with other factors, causes stress and trauma which undermines the ability for Aboriginal people to improve their circumstances.

⁴ ABS 2014

⁵ AIHW 2014

AHV staff, particularly our Housing Officers who are on the frontline of service delivery, have seen firsthand the impact of family violence on tenants and their families.

It is concerning that there are a significant number of housing applicants on our waiting list who have experienced family violence. AHV staff estimate that there may be as many as 10 to 30 percent of approximately 300 applicants who are on our priority waiting list who have identified that family violence is a direct or indirect cause of their current unsafe or insecure housing.

However, with over 1,100 clients on our waiting list, and an annual turnover of approximately 150 tenancies, and with no transitional housing, it is not possible for AHV to accommodate all applicants at risk of harm from family violence. There is no doubt that there are many Aboriginal people who are exposed to violence that AHV cannot accommodate. These victims may be in refuges, sleeping on couches, sleeping rough or remaining in volatile circumstances where they are at risk of harm. If they are fortunate they will be able to find safe and secure housing from other transitional housing providers.

However, with limited growth in social housing stock in Victoria it is becoming increasingly harder to find any form of temporary housing. It is hard to imagine how the supply of social housing has recovered from the previous government's reported \$426 million (49 percent) reduction in funding for housing.⁶ AHV strongly supports the view reported recently of Justice Connect, Domestic Violence Victoria, the Victorian Council of Social Service, Council to Homeless Persons, Victorian Public Tenants Association, Tenants Union of Victoria and Community Housing Federation of Victoria that:

Victoria's shortage of affordable housing deters victims from leaving violent relationships, pushes victims into homelessness [and] can make perpetrators more isolated and increase the risk of repeated or escalated violence".⁷

The situation is no better where it is our tenants that are experiencing family violence. With little turnover in tenancies, many ultimately may have no choice but to abandon their quest for tenancy with us in order to find safety. Our data is limited in regard to the recording of family violence as a reason for exiting. However, there are some indications from our records and from observations of our Housing Officers that family violence may be as significant a cause of our tenants exiting our properties as is reflected in our priority applications.

Based on reports from Housing Officers it is estimated that approximately ten percent of our tenancies at some point in time involve severe family violence and that there are many more tenancies where there is some indications of family violence. Housing Officers felt it was difficult to identify how often family violence occurs because many incidents of family violence went undetected and unreported because of victim's 'shame'. However, it was observed that the victims of the more extreme violence were generally single mothers, for many of whom a pattern of abusive relationships was evident.

Housing Officers reported that in many cases where family violence is visibly present there are other issues in the households such as drug and alcohol abuse, mental health issues and gambling. Housing

⁶ Tim Colebatch, 'Victoria's economy: Ignore the pain talk up the gain', *The Age*, 17 November 2014.

⁷ Bianca Hall, 'Housing costs trapping women in domestic violence', *The Age*, 22 May 2015.

Officers reported that significant use of the drug ice contributes to violence, and extreme violence, in the home against family members, partner and former partners. In one case a male partner who had been gaoled for the significant harm he had caused to the victim had later repartnered with the victim and in the absence of ice use there were no obvious signs of any family violence.

Our Housing Officers report firsthand that family violence has an enormous impact on our tenants and their families. Exposure to family violence creates considerable stress, anxiety and trauma to tenants and their children. In many cases child protection is involved, and the risk of removal of the children from the family is increased. Housing Officers report some victims, mostly mothers, are able to get on their feet with the support of families and/or service supports.

However, Housing Officers report that some tenants are unable to deal with the impact of the violence along with the cumulative impact of a range of other problems that they may have. In these cases there are a whole range of signs that circumstances are spiralling out of control. The inability or unwillingness to engage with supports is an important sign as is the increase in substance abuse, the inability to manage finances, including paying rent, and maintain the condition of the house and household chores. Often the children bear the brunt as the victims are inattentive and neglectful of dependents.

AHV's Housing Officers observe that many victims of family violence are survivors. They themselves have previously been victims and/or are merely surviving the violence without being able to move ahead. Some flee the violence to refuges or to other family members. Many stay, endure and survive.

It is our observation that family violence undermines housing stability and directly and indirectly undermines efforts to improve the circumstances of Aboriginal people.

There is no doubt that the vastly higher occurrence of family violence in the Aboriginal population in Victoria is a symptom of ongoing socio-economic disadvantage.

It is often acknowledged that there are many factors, in addition to those mentioned above, contributing to the occurrence of family violence in Victorian Aboriginal communities. One factor may be the high level of trauma and traumatic events suffered by Aboriginal people including related to deaths and incarceration of family members and family separation . This also may include inter-generational trauma arising from the impact of child removal and disruption of parenting. There are also social factors such as ongoing social and economic exclusion of Aboriginal people and community factors such as the loss of authority of Elders and undermining of community social norms, and the loss of role, status and disempowerment of Aboriginal males.

It is AHV's view that to address the high rates of family violence in the Aboriginal community, responses need to ameliorate the impact of family violence when it occurs and address the underlying needs of victims and perpetrators. Reducing the incidence of family violence will only occur when the circumstances giving rise to family violence are adequately dealt with.

There must be an absolute priority on protecting and safeguarding victims.

Appropriate civil and criminal responses are important to protect victims and are effective deterrents to many but not all perpetrators. Some victims re-enter relationships in contravention of

intervention or restraining orders, out of fear or out of a belief that the relationship will get better, and violence occurs again.

Many Aboriginal people still fear the power of police, courts and government over themselves and other Aboriginal people to such an extent that they will not co-operate with authorities, even where they are exposed to harm or fear of harm. In part this reflects cultural values and obligations regarding caring for others and concern for not getting them in trouble or hurting other community members. In part it may also be genuine concern for perpetrators who may have been victims of sexual or physical abuse themselves or may just be doing it tough and showing signs of not being able to cope.

It is AHV's view that community based approaches may be more effective in protecting some victims. Approaches that strengthen community norms and give and reinforce the authority of respected Elders have proven effective in justice settings such as the Koori Courts in sentencing offenders and reducing reoffending. These types of approaches may be effective in creating circumstances where orders are respected by victims and perpetrators, and where victims have the confidence to take out orders when they feel it is necessary. The effectiveness may be increased even further if victims and perpetrators are able to access culturally appropriate services that reinforce Aboriginal cultural values and meet their needs. These services may include treatment services, educational/counselling/mentoring and coaching type services, and even mediation services where appropriate.

These types of services would be even more beneficial if available at the time of relationship breakdown or through parenting programs for vulnerable people such as young parents, or even to single parents dealing with new partners. In the existing cycle of violence it is important to address the needs of young parents and to build their parenting capability particularly given the impact for many of being removed from their parents, the high level of stress and trauma and the low income and dearth of social resources.

We fully support the Aboriginal specific healing services for victims that have been developed and are delivering services for Aboriginal victims in Victoria. Many victims of family violence are survivors of other forms of violence earlier in their lives. Victims need to have the safety and security to live free of violence in the future. This means housing that is not only safe and secure but also stable. Victims need to have access to counselling and support services to heal the trauma. They also need to be empowered; to have the confidence to build a life for themselves and their family free of violence. That means understanding the impact of violence on themselves and their children and having the courage, strength and the resources to be able to act protectively. It also means having the confidence to re-engage with and complete an education, or get and maintain a job or even just to socialise or even re-partner. This kind of support is likely to be most effective if it can be delivered in a culturally affirming community context.

We fully support holistic, family based victim services as they align better with Aboriginal cultural values and practices. Similarly, better results can be achieved if services and support for victims and their families are better integrated. Improved integration of support services including family support services with housing services from emergency housing transitioning into long term housing would result in greater stability and improved outcomes.

Where children are involved or there are family and community reasons for continuing contact between victim and perpetrators it is our view that holistic family based services would be more effective if they are embedded in community based approaches.

Victims are far more likely to have the safety and security to pursue their lives if perpetrators are able to resolve their own issues and focus on their own aspirations and lives. Many perpetrators have themselves been victims and need to be able to heal and resolve their own issues. In order to do this, perpetrators need effective services and stability in their lives, including housing stability.

The difficulty is that the supply of housing for Aboriginal perpetrators is inadequate. AHV does not provide transitional housing and manages and owns very few one and two bedroom properties. In recent community consultations undertaken by AHV, workers have identified that there have been a number of Aboriginal hostels that have been closed in communities along the Murray, which will create real difficulties in housing family violence perpetrators.

It is AHV's view that safety for victims should be followed by stable and secure housing.

It is AHV's view that improved access to affordable housing is an important part of an effective response to family violence. Both victims and perpetrators separately need to have timely access to housing to reduce further violence and prevent further harm to victims. This housing needs to be integrated with appropriate support services and with longer term housing. Stable and secure housing for victims and perpetrators alike is necessary for therapeutic healing responses to be effective and for victims and perpetrators to be empowered to move on with their lives.

There are obstacles to AHV, which many other housing agencies also experience, in being able to respond to family violence and contribute to supporting Aboriginal victims and perpetrators. The key obstacle, as raised previously, is the shortage in the supply of affordable housing.

Additionally, agencies bear the financial costs of family violence. Perversely, housing agencies such as AHV suffer loss of revenue when they assist tenants to relocate to refuges for their safety. Many agencies lose the rental income they otherwise would have charged as rents are reduced to \$15 a week to hold a property for tenants in refuges.

More significantly housing agencies bear the cost of damage to property, such as holes punched in walls, windows and doors smashed or simply a failure to take care of the property. It is estimated by Housing Officers that family violence contributes to approximately ten percent of all the cases of tenant damage to property and roughly eighteen percent of the cost of restoring damage to properties. This may be conservative. There are many cases where the damage to property was well in excess of \$10,000. While small in number, the vast majority of tenants who identified that they were abandoning their tenancies because of family violence also had tenant related damage to the property assessed at greater than \$1,000, with over half over \$10,000. In many cases the costs of damage go unrecovered. This is because of a reluctance to pursue victims, difficulties of establishing who was responsible for the damage including the reluctance of victims often to identify perpetrators, the cost and expense involved in pursuing civil claims, particularly as many tenants and perpetrators lack the financial capacity to repay costs in any event.