

10 October 2019

New figures reveal Victorian women face growing risk of homelessness

YWCA has been forced to turn away hundreds of Victorian women seeking affordable housing this year with demand outstripping available supply, according to new figures released today.

The data revealed that 449 women have applied to YWCA for affordable housing since January but only 45 could be assisted by the women's advocacy and support group.

It also found nearly two-third (64%) of the women who applied for affordable housing had experienced family violence and most were living in crisis accommodation, had no fixed address or were couch-surfing with friends and family.

One third of the applications came from women aged 45 years and over.

YWCA National Housing and Property Development Director Jan Berriman said demand for affordable housing, defined as requiring 30 per cent or less of their income, was reaching crisis point for women.

"With many of these women experiencing family and domestic violence, the severe shortfall in available affordable housing both in Victoria, and nationally, means women's safety is at risk," she said.

Ms Berriman said that research by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare showed that in 2017-18, 64% of people seeking specialist homeless services (SHS) in Victoria were women. The actual number of women seeking assistance had increased dramatically – from 53,885 in 2011-12 to 74,839 in 2017-18.

"Women's homelessness is a hidden problem, mostly because they don't fit the typical stereotype of a homeless person," she said.

"The general public tends to imagine homeless people as rough sleepers, mostly men living on the street."

"But there's a growing group of older women who have been unpaid carers, who worked in casual jobs and have little to no savings or superannuation and are at risk of homelessness."

"Census statistics reveal a 31 per cent rise in the number of older women experiencing homelessness between 2011 and 2016."

Melbourne woman Yoshie knows the fear of homelessness as well as the healing power that can come with safe, affording housing.

She was provided with accommodation by YWCA in a rooming house in 2015 after escaping domestic violence.

"I felt safe there because everyone had had similar experiences to me and understood what I was going through," she said.

“YWCA supported me through the Transitions program to go back to school. I took English classes, and lots of computer classes. I was working a lot to try and save money as well.”

After four years at YWCA’s rooming house, Yoshie has recently been able to secure private rental accommodation.

“Living in my own home feels like living in a castle! I feel hopeful, like my future will be much happier with more opportunities,” she says.

Ms Berriman said YWCA Housing provided 149,285 nights of affordable accommodation each year across Australia but it was not enough to meet demand.

“We need to develop a gender-responsive National Housing Strategy to address the rising number of women falling into homelessness and the lack of social and affordable housing stock,” she said.

“We need a catalytic investment in housing stock – half a million social and affordable rental homes are needed to meet demand across Australia.”

“A safe, affordable home is essential for women to build their futures and engage with education, social and workforce opportunities after experiencing homelessness.

”Access to affordable housing will lead to freedom and empowerment for countless numbers of women in need.”

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