

**OPTIONS TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO EXISTING AND ALTERNATE  
ACCOMMODATION TO ADDRESS THE SOCIAL HOUSING SHORTAGE**

**Organisation:** Domestic Violence Service Management

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# Domestic Violence Service Management

Submission to the NSW Legislative Committee:  
Potential inquiry into options to improve access to  
existing and alternate accommodation to address the  
social housing shortage



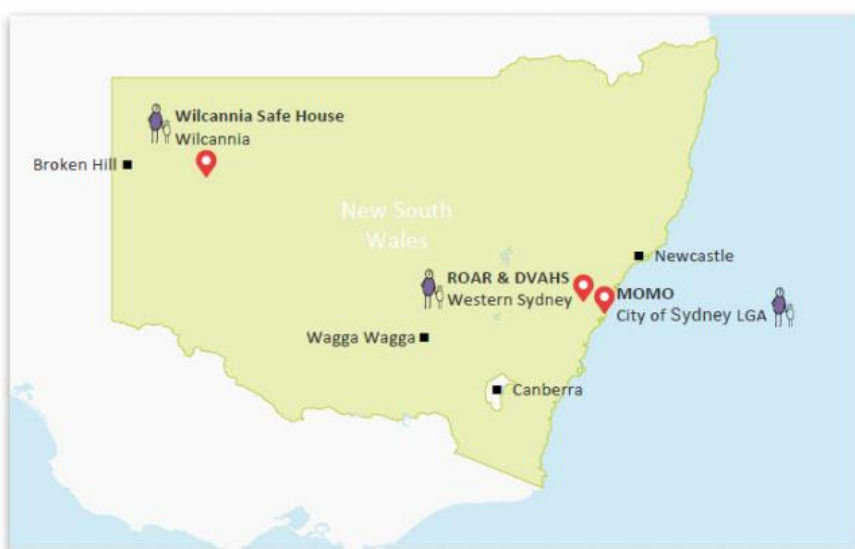
August 2021

# About Domestic Violence Service Management

Domestic Violence Service Management's (DVSM) **vision** is for a world where women, families and communities live free from violence, have equal rights, opportunities and the freedom to reach their potential. People are at the heart of our approach and we use a case-by-case process to identify, understand and respond to a person's individual needs. This includes advocacy, housing services and/or goal setting.

DVSM provides direct services to people experiencing Domestic and Family Violence and homelessness, and together with the Insight Exchange Foundation works to strengthen social, service, and system responses to people experiencing domestic and family violence. DVSM provides support services in an urban context (Inner Sydney), in a suburban context (Western Sydney) and in remote rural NSW (Wilcannia).

DVSM offer four services across New South Wales. Moving Out Moving On (Inner Sydney), Refuge Outreach Action Response and Domestic Violence After Hours Service (both in Western Sydney) and Wilcannia Safe House in rural New South Wales. Together, we supported more than 1,400 clients last financial year.



**A map of DVSM locations within NSW**

The benefits of having varied services in different locations around New South Wales includes excellent information sharing possibilities of common and unique challenges, ways of identifying systemic challenges affecting women and children and the ability to work together to problem solve and continually improve our service to our clients.

Each year the DVSM team are advocating for, educating, supporting and guiding women and their families in Sydney and Wilcannia. Clients can self refer or are referred to us via police, hospitals, DV Line & Homeleneessess services, court advocacy and legal assistance services, but there are so many more who need assistance.

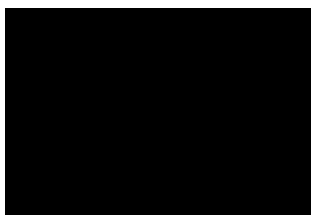
# A letter from DVSM's General Manager

Dear NSW Legislative Committee,

Domestic Violence Service Management (DVSM) is at the frontline of the domestic violence crisis in Australia. Each day, our service teams are assisting and supporting women and children escaping domestic, family and sexual violence (DF&SV). Through our case work, we are able to identify concerning, evolving issues and themes that thousands of women and children across the country experience every day.

DVSM operates a “no wrong door” policy, whereby everyone who seeks our help, will receive assistance and advice, including referrals to appropriate services (if DVSM services are not suitable). We are acutely aware that when someone seeks support, it might be the first, last or only time they reach out. Every interaction to support someone is important. Our case managers work with clients who are in a variety of challenging and dangerous situations. Through our role as first responders and providers of direct services to people experiencing domestic and family violence and homelessness, DVSM is aware safe and affordable housing is a key priority for the majority of the clients we see.

We have included some considerations. The complexity of the issues surrounding domestic violence require long term planning along with increased funding and support. DVSM commends the Committee seeking views and look forward to working together to ensure each year, more women and children experiencing violence have access to safe accommodation options that meet their needs to live safely.



Sally Grimsley-Ballard  
General Manager  
Domestic Violence Service Management

# There is an urgent need for increased housing stock

**Family and domestic violence is the primary reason women and children seek specialist homelessness services, but only 3.2% are currently receiving the long-term housing solutions they need\*.**

A key issue facing our clients is the availability of safe housing. Increased access to housing enables women and their children to escape dangerous domestic, family & sexual violence situations. Without housing, women & children do not have anywhere to go & are often subjected to remaining in a potentially life-threatening situation. The supply of additional housing must include a mix of crisis, transitional & social housing to ensure clients are supported into appropriate accommodation at every stage of escaping violence, & ensure no clients fall through the cracks of the system. Additional housing must also take into account today's family size. There is an opportunity to create housing that accommodates larger families than the nuclear family of the past.

In addition to urgently building new accommodation & setting enforced, minimum social housing building targets across the state, there is an opportunity for the government to repurpose currently empty, habitable housing & buildings across the state. These buildings could be utilised for short, medium, & long-term housing.

Further opportunities and strategies to increase housing and accommodation in particular **to a) better support 'meanwhile use' (temporary supportive accommodation), and b) options to improve access to existing accommodation to provide community housing:**

- **Utilising empty government housing properties:** We are confident there are many government owned housing units sitting empty across NSW. Units and houses allocated for teachers, police, and health workers. There is an immediate opportunity to increase short term housing capacity within rural New South Wales. It is well reported that there is severe overcrowding in Aboriginal Communities across the country. In Wilcannia, where DVSM runs the Wilcannia Safe House, this is particularly evident with examples of 8 adults living in a 3 bedroom house. Within the community, there is potential to utilise surplus government housing stock for short term leases to our client's escaping violence. This accommodation, currently allocated for police & teachers moving to Wilcannia, remains vacant for months at a time and there are known 'intake' times when contracts start for both roles. Short term leases allow the properties to be available as required when new teachers or police are re-locating to Wilcannia. There are also older police properties sitting vacant and that could be re-purposed/refurbished. We are confident that there are examples of this across NSW and Safe Houses or Community Housing Providers could carefully administer this accommodation for as long or short term as available. We understand the risks of damage etc to the properties and the challenge of delays with trades but trialling it at least with strict conditions is a quick win to the current situation.

# Empty buildings and short term programs

- **Utilising Empty Student Accommodation:** Utilising currently uninhabited student accommodation across the state, as short term accommodation for DF&SV victims. We know for example at Sydney University there is unoccupied student accommodation that could be utilised for short term crisis accommodation. Services could provide the bedding and work in conjunction with the universities and possibly Community Housing Providers to manage the safety and short term support. There are at least 4 months left of this year that we can confirm there will not be any further International Students. Crisis accommodation is needed every day. We understand this has commenced in Sydney or negotiations are taking place. There is vacant student accommodation across NSW that even small sections could be used carefully for crisis accommodation for women and children fleeing violence.
- **Increase National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS) properties**
- **Increase the timeframe of DCJ Start Safely Subsidy period from 3 years to 5 years** to provide subsidised rent for women and families for longer periods to allow for them to rebuild and reestablish their life after escaping DF&SV. If women have stressors reduced, they are more likely to have capacity to be working or studying.

## ***Current major planning barriers to 'meanwhile use':***

- **Local Government does not appear to be part of the solution.** Expectation remains with the State and Federal Governments. Local Governments can also set clear targets and expectations for at least 7% of new builds being allocated to social housing and ensure adherence and public measurement of set targets. Local government can also commit to investing some of their reserves with Community Housing Providers to obtain & build more low rent housing for their communities. We are interested to understand more of the affordable housing modelling Sydney University has completed noting \*\$100 per week rentals are possible with the City of Sydney and Blacktown LGAs (\*[The New Daily: The affordable housing plan that could create \\$100 –a-week rents at no extra cost to the tax payers. July 23, 2021](#)).
- Empty old hostels and dormitory accommodation not being refurbished/repurposed. We understand the costs but some of the challenges would be solvable with collaboration.

***Challenges for crisis, keyworker, and other short term accommodation models.*** There are significant barriers in accessing the existing short-term accommodation options for:

- Clients with pets - Clients often had to find ways to board their pets as most refuges are not pet friendly, which isn't always available or can cause extra financial burden.
- Clients with children above a certain age and different gender - Clients often face challenges when accessing emergency accommodation with their teenage sons, while TA as the only alternative isn't a medium-long term solution.
- Clients with co-occurring mental health and AOD use - Clients often face challenges when accessing refuges when they have complex mental health needs, are in active drug use, or in recent AOD recovery. Many refuge options request for women be abstinent from drug use for 3-6 months.
- Clients on NIL income and temporary visas - Clients often face challenges accessing refuges when they are not eligible for Centrelink payments, do not have working rights, or are not eligible for social housing due to visa status.

# Bipartisan work at *all* government levels is required

## d) Lack of Housing

There is a lack of all types of housing stock available to clients across the state that requires bipartisan priority attention:

We understand the State and Local Governments know adequate housing is a priority but COVID and current challenges in NSW mean further, clear, and accountable targets must be implemented:

- Increase new build allocations for affordable housing.

Noting:

- Existing Public housing is old/ageing, often requires a lot of repairs.
- Properties available do not always accommodate today's family size. Housing structures often work on nuclear family structure although family sizes have grown to 4 and 5 children in families, making it difficult to secure housing for a family with more than 3 children.
- There is overcrowding in Aboriginal Communities (and in ALL communities and LGA's across NSW)
- Private rental market is not a viable option for most families due to high cost, and negative perceptions of families escaping DFV.
- A 2017 Report on Government Services in NSW indicates that since 2009 the number of public housing homes has dropped by 16,000 dwellings.  
(<https://www.thebigsmoke.com.au/2021/05/07/there-are-two-vacant-properties-for-each-homeless-person-in-nsw-law-homeless-person/>)
- According to Census (2017) The number of empty homes across Australia is one million. (note this also includes holiday rentals)  
(<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/census-snapshot-one-million-homes-left-empty-across-australia-20170717-gxcpiw.html>)
- Private rental options are not long-term and vary based on the market costs and lease agreements. This causing concern for women and families who are seeking sustainable and long-term housing after escaping DFV

*Case Study-* MOMO supported a woman with three children who was experiencing D&FV perpetrated by her ex-husband. Client applied for housing assistance and was approved for Start Safely subsidy rather than the public housing register. The decision from housing required the client to locate a suitable private rental property for herself and her children. The client identified significant concerns with this pathway as she was seeking a secure long-term pathway for herself and her children and wanted to be approved for public housing instead. The client had concerns that moving into short-term or medium-term accommodation in the precarious private rental market could lead to homelessness or housing insecurity at the end of the three year start safely period. The woman was working part-time and as a single parent of three children she did not feel confident moving into the private rental market. Case Managers assisted the client with appealing the housing decision to request for her to be approved for DCJ public housing instead of Start Safely, however unfortunately the clients appeal was declined.

# Community Housing providers

## **e) Support for and accountability of registered community housing providers**

-Greater support required by community housing providers for clients who are living in community housing properties.

-Case Managers have worked with clients who have had trouble with their housing providers including lack of communication, accountability and follow-up, which has then led to issues with their tenancies. Sometimes these issues including rental arrears are significant and there has been no contact. There have also been cases where tradespeople have told the housing provider work has been completed but no action took place. We are aware of a couple of cases where the house was not fit for living but the tenant was waiting for works and there was no follow up.

*Case Study:* MOMO has supported a single woman who moved into a property managed by a community housing provider. During her tenancy, she experienced some safety concerns regarding a person that would frequent the building. The woman and the CM had a difficult time trying to contact the community housing provider about the safety concern. Eventually due to a lack of communication and follow up, the woman decided she did not feel safe to maintain her tenancy with this provider.

**We are happy to provide further case studies or discuss the challenges and our ideas for improving the housing situation as useful. Governments, Community Housing Providers and Investors can make a difference to this issue. Further education and primary prevention work will also ensure there is more understanding and support for women and children who find themselves homeless because of domestic and family violence.**



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