



# **A Good Life Begins at Home**

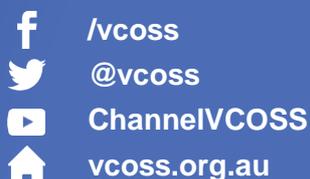
VCOSS Submission to the Inquiry into  
Homelessness in Australia

June 2020

The Victorian Council of Social Service is the peak body of the social and community sector in Victoria.

VCOSS members reflect the diversity of the sector and include large charities, peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups and individuals interested in social policy.

In addition to supporting the sector, VCOSS represents the interests of Victorians experiencing poverty and disadvantage, and advocates for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society.



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A fully accessible version is available online at [vcoss.org.au/policy/](http://vcoss.org.au/policy/)



VCOSS acknowledges the traditional owners of country and pays respect to past, present and emerging Elders.

This document was prepared on the lands of the Kulin Nation.



## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Summary of recommendations .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Lead a national approach to ending homelessness .....</b>	<b>7</b>
Develop a national homelessness strategy .....	8
Reorient services to homelessness prevention .....	9
Provide funding certainty to community services.....	10
<b>Start a big build of public and community housing .....</b>	<b>13</b>
Support the states and territories to build new social housing homes.....	14
Stimulate investment in social and affordable housing .....	15
Build homes for First Nations People across the country .....	16
<b>Strengthen the social safety net.....</b>	<b>17</b>
Increase income supports to keep people out of poverty.....	17
Prevent a long-term unemployment crisis .....	18

# Introduction

Having a place to call home that is safe, affordable, secure, healthy and fit-for-purpose creates the conditions for people to thrive – for example, to participate and achieve in education and training, find a job and hold onto it, and engage in other activities that support wellbeing.

The last Census found that there are 116,000 Australians experiencing homelessness on any given night.

We are faced with this problem today because successive governments, at all levels, have largely treated the **symptoms** of homelessness – for example, through programs that respond to individual-level factors or characteristics, when people are already in crisis. These programmatic responses are necessary, but without concurrent and sustained action on the **underlying structural and systemic causes** of homelessness, demand-management becomes the focus, funding and practice orient to squeaky wheel crisis responses, homelessness prevention is crowded out, and the broader societal goal of ending homelessness is lost.

The current COVID-19 pandemic has magnified pre-existing fragilities across all parts of our housing system, including problems with the level of supply, lack of affordability, security of tenure, choice (limited diversity of stock), housing quality and efficiency, and associated issues such as over-crowding.

The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Homelessness in Australia. This submission focuses on the national leadership required to coordinate structural and systemic changes desperately needed to end homelessness in Australia. Some of the effort has already begun through the pandemic crisis response, such as increases to income support. As we embark on pandemic recovery, we must use this opportunity to recover in a way that is smart, inclusive and fair.

VCOSS believes that sustained action is required across three priority recommendations:

- Lead a national approach to ending homelessness
- Start a big build of public and community housing
- Strengthen the social safety net.

We have chosen to highlight these three priorities as we know that the impact of our members' work would be maximised if there was enough housing available for their clients, and if other structural drivers of homelessness could be prevented. That is what VCOSS believes will end homelessness in Australia.

# Summary of recommendations

## Lead a national approach to ending homelessness

- Develop a national homelessness strategy based on the following principles:
  1. A homelessness prevention approach to policy and programs across government and services to reduce the incidence of homelessness.
  2. Adequate resourcing of specialist and mainstream services to deliver the strategy.
- Support mainstream and specialist services to reorient crisis response to homelessness prevention.
- Support mainstream agencies with ‘first to know’ potential to identify and address risk factors for homelessness.
- Strengthen local partnerships between ‘first to know’ agencies and specialist services.
- Increase funding to housing and homelessness services to support the implementation of the national homelessness strategy.
- Commit to extending to the Equal Remuneration Order supplementation or increase the base rate of grants to incorporate the current rate of supplementation.
- Increase default contract lengths for community services to seven years, per the Productivity Commission recommendation in “Reforms to Human Services” report.
- Pursue funding models for community service organisations that are sustainable, flexible and reduce burdensome reporting requirements.

## Start a big build of public and community housing

- Establish a new national partnership to fund social housing growth in the states and territories.
- Mandate universal housing standards for accessibility, safety and energy efficiency in all new social housing homes.
- Establish a new rental investment scheme.
- Restrict tax deductions for negatively geared property investments.
- Reduce the tax discount on capital gains.
- Resource Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations to develop and deliver a new national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing Strategy.
- Implement a 10 per cent funding increase under the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement for Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations.

## Strengthen the social safety net

- Maintain the higher rate of JobSeeker
- Maintain JobKeeper for those who need it beyond September.
- Increase Commonwealth Rent Assistance by at least 30% for low-income households currently receiving the maximum rate.
- Expand eligibility for income support and JobKeeper to temporary visa holders.
- Pursue recovery and stimulus programs that prioritise employment-intensive growth and yield jobs that can be filled by jobseekers experiencing disadvantage.
- Redesign JobActive to build the skills and capabilities of working-age Australians who are out of work and provide genuine pathways to sustainable employment.

# Lead a national approach to ending homelessness

This section responds to the following Terms of Reference:

4. Opportunities for early intervention and prevention of homelessness

10. Governance and funding arrangements in relation to housing and homelessness, particularly as they relate to the responsibility of Local, State, Territory and Federal Governments.

There is no single cause of homelessness in Australia.

For some people, legal, health, family and/or financial issues cause, or are caused by, their experiences of homelessness. Family violence continues to be a significant driver of homelessness, especially for women and children, comprising 40% of homelessness service system demand.<sup>1</sup>

However, the key drivers of homelessness are structural (such as the supply of affordable housing, social security, and employment markets) and systemic (such as the state of the private rental market, the accessibility and quality of health services and education, access to justice, and access to other supports that can help to sustain housing, such as mental health services).

Responding to homelessness – and importantly, preventing homelessness before it occurs – requires action from all levels of government, industry and the community to target the structural, systemic and individual drivers of homelessness. Only the Federal Government can coordinate this national approach.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 'Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2018-19' November 2019.

## Develop a national homelessness strategy

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Develop a national homelessness strategy based on the following principles:

1. A homelessness prevention approach to policy and programs across government and services to reduce the incidence of homelessness.
2. Adequate resourcing of specialist and mainstream services to deliver the strategy.

*The Road Home* in 2008 was Australia's last national homelessness strategy. It provided some opportunities to trial the effectiveness of new models identified as contemporary best practice with funding under the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH) (and the subsequent National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA)). These models were built on under key Victorian reforms including the Royal Commission into Family Violence in 2016 and Homes for Victorians in 2018.

The incidence and nature of homelessness has changed significantly since *The Road Home*. Since then, services providing support to people experiencing homelessness have been subject to uncoordinated sector reforms, funding uncertainty at all levels of government and stop-start activity. Agencies continue to receive funding for limited services, programs or trials. As a consequence, a fragmented and poorly coordinated system has emerged, where services do not join up cohesively. Existing coordination mechanisms endeavor to address this, but issues persist.

People navigating this system often face far too many wrong doors before they get the support they need.

A new national homelessness strategy would provide much needed coordination and resourcing of the necessary policy, program and funding responses required to end homelessness. Further, a strategic national approach would provide opportunities to trial, evaluate and scale effective practice across jurisdictions.

VCOSS strongly believes that the effectiveness of a national homelessness strategy relies on the supply of social housing, which will be discussed further on page 10.

## Reorient services to homelessness prevention

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Support mainstream and specialist services to reorient crisis response to homelessness prevention.
- Support mainstream agencies with ‘first to know’ potential to identify and address risk factors for homelessness.
- Strengthen local partnerships between ‘first to know’ agencies and specialist services.

The nature of policy and funding and a chronic lack of affordable housing has forced the sector into providing crisis driven responses to homelessness. We will never end homelessness unless we reorient policies, programs and services from crisis responses to prevention.

All mainstream and specialist services have a role to play across the continuum of homelessness prevention, including:

- Early intervention approaches to support individuals and families at imminent risk of homelessness or who have recently become homeless;
- Eviction prevention approaches to keep people at risk of eviction in their home;
- Ongoing flexible support for people who have experienced homelessness to exit quickly and never experience it again.<sup>2</sup>

Specialist homelessness services (SHS) delivered by the states and territories are a critical part of this system, and in many cases, are the last safety net for individuals and families. SHS support people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness to access housing, overcome the barriers to keeping a home, and foster connections to the physical, personal and community resources which create a sense of belonging and provide protective factors.<sup>3</sup>

Most people also come into contact with mainstream services - like hospitals, GPs, schools, or maternal child health services - at various points in their life. Such services are universally accessible, non-stigmatising and provide a diversity of support options. They can be the ‘canary in the coalmine’ – they have line of sight to emerging risk factors for homelessness, and they are a trusted source of support for individuals and families. Some examples are:

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<sup>2</sup> Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, ‘*Typology of Homelessness Prevention*’, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Council to Homeless Persons, ‘*Position Paper on the Victorian Homelessness Action Plan Reform Project: A Framework for Ending Homelessness*’, 2013.

- Financial counsellors or emergency relief providers can identify a family at risk of rental stress;
- School and youth services can be the first point of contact for young people having trouble living in the family home;
- Community health agencies support their clients with the many personal factors that may make maintaining a home difficult, such as chronic disease, drug and alcohol use, and mental illness.

When risk factors are identified, these services provide a “soft entry” pathway to more specialised services as needed. With adequate resourcing, they are positioned to capitalise on their ‘first to know’ potential to play a greater role in preventing homelessness.

Mobilising ‘first to know’ agencies requires substantial cooperation, collaboration and networking between different service providers at the local and regional levels so that a broad range of risks and issues can be responded to.

Centrelink is well-positioned to act in a ‘first to know’ capacity. For example, the Melbourne City Mission (MCM) *Detour Innovation Action Project* involved the local Centrelink office and social work staff working in partnership with MCM, local government, local schools and Kids Under Cover. MCM staff were co-located at Centrelink, so that Centrelink staff could warm refer young people applying for Unreasonable to Live at Home (UTLAH) allowance, which was often a precursor to early home leaving and homelessness for young people.

## Provide funding certainty to community services

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase funding to housing and homelessness services to support the implementation of the national homelessness strategy.
- Commit to extending the Equal Remuneration Order supplementation or increase the base rate of grants to incorporate the current rate of supplementation.
- Increase default contract lengths for community services to seven years, per the Productivity Commission recommendation in “Reforms to Human Services” report.
- Pursue funding models for community service organisations that are sustainable, flexible and reduce burdensome reporting requirements.

Funding certainty is an essential condition for social services to plan for future demand, develop best practice service delivery and be resilient to shocks, and – crucially – to provide effective support to individuals and families at risk of or experiencing homelessness for as long as they need it.

Australia's SHS are jointly funded by state and federal governments under the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA). Established in 2018, the NHHA provided some much-needed federal coordination of homelessness service funding, by amalgamating the previously distinct National Affordable Housing Agreement and the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness.

Homelessness services provide support to more people every year. But they are forced to turn many away. In 2018-19, Victorian homelessness services turned away 105 people every day,<sup>4</sup> an increase from 90 per day in 2017-18. Across Australia, more than 90,000 people could not be supported by a homelessness services in 2018-19 because the system could not meet their need at the time.

VCOSS anticipates that this situation will worsen in the coming months, as more people are likely to need support when the housing-related pandemic protections – such as the eviction moratorium, the various state and territory financial relief programs, and Commonwealth income supports – come to an end.

While services are providing more support than ever, Federal funding to provide those services has been decreasing over the past six years, according to analysis of Federal budgets by Homelessness Australia. The Federal Government must critically examine the adequacy and security of funding arrangements for homelessness services across the country so that services can continue to deliver quality support commensurate to changing demand.

Funding uncertainty is one of the biggest challenges facing the community services sector. Managing short-term funding allocations, time-limited project grants and last-minute funding limits their ability to deliver quality services and retain skilled staff. This means turnover and instability for workers and disrupts relationships that workers have with their clients and community partners.

Funding bodies use a standard service agreement lasting four years, supplemented by many short-term contracts. These short-term arrangements often roll over repeatedly. This increases uncertainty for community service organisations and their staff, who must

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<sup>4</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *'Specialist Homelessness Services 2018-19: Victoria'*, September 2019.

constantly reapply for funding, diverting time and energy from the work of delivering services.

No organisation can operate to its full potential with a series of funding cliffs always looming on the horizon.

The Productivity Commission recommends community service contracts be extended to seven years.<sup>5</sup> The Federal Government should adopt this as the new standard for community sector funding.

Community service organisations, including SHS, benefited from the landmark Fair Work Commission decision in 2012, the Equal Remuneration Order (ERO) that addressed the gendered under-evaluation of work performed in much of the community services sector.

As a result, wages increased by up to 45 per cent over 10 years, and most governments across Australia, including the Federal Government, provided additional funding to ensure that community sector organisations could pay fair wages and maintain essential services to our communities. The funding for this additional supplementation is secured by legislation that expires next year.

The sector is deeply concerned about the impacts on the industry and the community if the Federal Government ceases paying ERO supplementation from July 2021. This will affect homelessness, families and children, domestic violence and other community services.

If the base grant for programs currently receiving ERO supplementation does not rise to incorporate the ERO payments, it will result in significant funding cuts for community sector organisations delivering federally funded programs. This will mean cuts to the services that people in communities across Australia rely on. It also means that the gains in gender equity achieved as a result of the Equal Remuneration Order will be diminished by job cuts in the community sector's predominantly female workforce. Community service organisations simply cannot absorb cuts of this magnitude. It will inevitably mean reductions in services to vulnerable people in the community and job losses for workers in the industry.

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<sup>5</sup> Productivity Commission, *Introducing Competition and Informed User Choice into Human Services: Reforms to Human Services*, October 2017.

# Start a big build of public and community housing

This section responds to the following Terms of Reference:

2. Factors affecting the incidence of homelessness, including housing-market factors
4. Opportunities for early intervention and prevention of homelessness

VCOSS works across a broad continuum of social policy issues. It is our experience that housing is at the heart of almost every social policy challenge.

A national homelessness strategy is essential to coordinating policy, programs and funding to support people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. But the effectiveness of support depends on there being housing that is affordable and appropriate for the people who need it.

Social housing provides stability and security of tenure for those people that the private housing market excludes, including people on low incomes, women escaping family violence, people with complex needs or with disability, and people who experience discrimination, who are currently overrepresented in the homelessness service system.

## ***Social housing explained***

Social housing is short-term and long-term rental housing owned and run by the government or not-for-profit agencies. It includes both public housing and community housing. It is for people on low incomes, especially those who have recently experienced homelessness or who have other special needs.

Rent for social housing is set as a proportion of income. In Victoria, public housing tenants are charged 25 per cent of their income, or the market rent, whichever is lower.

Community housing organisations usually charge tenants between 25 to 30 per cent of their income plus the value of the Commonwealth Rent Assistance that each tenant receives, or 74.99 per cent of the market rent, whichever is lower.

Governments across Australia have reduced their investment in social housing. As a consequence, there is currently a shortfall of 433,000 social housing homes across the country.<sup>6</sup>

In Victoria, there are more than 82,000 Victorians on the Victorian Housing Register, the wait list for public and community housing<sup>7</sup>. It is projected to reach 100,000 by mid-2020,<sup>8</sup> based on analysis undertaken before the pandemic.

VCOSS strongly believes that building more social housing – both public and community housing - is the most effective way that governments can prevent homelessness.

## Support the states and territories to build new social housing homes

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish a new national partnership to fund social housing growth in the states and territories.
- Mandate universal housing standards for accessibility, safety and energy efficiency in all new social housing homes.

In 2019, the Victorian Government started construction on 1,000 new social housing homes committed under the Homes for Victorians strategy. A further 168 new social housing homes and 23,000 renovations have been committed to as part of Victoria's pandemic recovery plan. VCOSS has welcomed a good start on much-needed investment. However, more is needed, and the Federal Government should increase capital funding to the states and territories to grow social housing stock across the country.

The Victorian Housing Peaks Alliance<sup>9</sup> which comprises eight community sector peak bodies, including VCOSS as convener, recommends building 6,000 new public and community homes in Victoria each year for the next 10 years.<sup>10</sup> This includes 300 homes for Aboriginal housing. Across Australia, ACOSS recommends that the Federal Government invest in 30,000 new social housing homes over the next three years.

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<sup>6</sup> Julie Lawson et al, 'Social Housing as Infrastructure', AHURI, June 2019, p55.

<sup>7</sup> Parliament of Victoria, *Inquiry into the Public Housing Renewal Program (Final Report)*, June 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Based on analysis by the Victorian Public Tenants Association, 'Budget Submission 2020-21', November 2019.

<sup>9</sup> The Victorian Housing Peaks Alliance comprises of the following organisations: VCOSS, Council to Homeless Persons, Victorian Public Tenants Association, Community Housing Industry Association Victoria, Domestic Violence Victoria, Aboriginal Housing Victoria, Tenants Victoria and Justice Connect.

<sup>10</sup> Derived from DELWP, *Victorians in Future 2019 (VIF2019)*, July 2019, p8 and DHHS, *Housing Assistance: Additional Service Delivery Data 2018 – 19*, September 2019, p8.

Individuals and families who need social housing in Victoria are diverse, and new social housing homes should reflect this to be:

- Well-located in proximity to employment opportunities, public transport connections and services;
- Safe and healthy, meeting minimum standards for energy efficiency, safety and accessibility;
- A diverse construction mix, meeting priority and under-serviced needs groups;
- A mix of public and community housing.

For example, there is a significant shortage of properties suitable for a single person, which may be older Victorians or individuals leaving hospital, prison or family violence situations. Presently, many individuals exit prison into emergency accommodation or rooming houses, others remain in violent situations to avoid homelessness, or cycle through the homelessness service system. At the other end of the spectrum, a lack of housing suitable for large families has resulted in increased rates of severe overcrowding.

## Stimulate investment in social and affordable housing

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish a new rental investment scheme.
- Restrict tax deductions for negatively geared property investments.
- Reduce the tax discount on capital gains.

As well as direct investment to grow social housing stock, the Federal Government can provide a sustainable pathway out of homelessness by improving policy to facilitate social and affordable housing growth.

A new rental investment scheme should be established to replace the discontinued National Rental Affordability Scheme and complement affordable housing investment finance schemes such as the National Housing Finance Investment Corporation, Bond Aggregator and the Housing Infrastructure Facility.

Tax concessions for investment housing include a 50 per cent discount on capital gains, together with 'negative gearing' arrangements which allow investors to deduct losses made on rental properties. The tax benefits of negative gearing and capital gains discounts go mainly to those with high incomes. They combine to inflate housing prices and push first-home buyers out of the market, by encouraging borrowing to speculate on housing prices

and promoting purchasing existing properties over new builds. To help end homelessness, we must reform tax incentives that drive up the cost of housing.

## Build homes for First Nations People across the country

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Resource Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations to develop and deliver a new national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing Strategy.
- Implement a 10 per cent funding increase under the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement for Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations.

First Nations peoples made up 26 per cent of all homelessness service users in 2018-19, despite making up 3.2 per cent of the Australian population. First Nations peoples are more likely to live in insecure or overcrowded housing, and experience intergenerational homelessness.<sup>11</sup> Improving housing outcomes for First Nations peoples must be a national priority if we are to make any progress towards *Closing the Gap*.

Homelessness amongst First Nations people is strongly associated with the experience of dispossession and dislocation.<sup>12</sup> As a consequence, the structural drivers of homelessness in Australia – housing unaffordability, the critical social housing shortage and poverty – have specific adverse effects on First Nations peoples. Further, mainstream social services, including housing and homelessness services, often impose a model of support which does not meet the needs of many First Nations people.

In Victoria, the newly launched Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework is a critical first step to enabling an Aboriginal self-determined response to homelessness. Aboriginal Housing Victoria developed the Framework and the Victorian Government has provided funding to begin implementation.

The Federal Government can complement this by coordinating the development of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing strategy for urban, rural and remote areas, with a 10 per cent funding increase under the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement to build capacity for Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations. This would support their viability as an alternative to mainstream community housing providers and support their capacity to avail of finance schemes.

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<sup>11</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 'Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2018-19: Indigenous Clients', 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Aboriginal Housing Victoria, 'The Victorian Aboriginal Housing and Homelessness Framework', February 2020.

# Strengthen the social safety net

This section responds to the following Terms of Reference:

2. factors affecting the incidence of homelessness, including housing-market factors
4. opportunities for early intervention and prevention of homelessness

For most people, housing is the biggest expense in their regular budget. The cost of housing is a significant contributor to poverty and trying to maintain housing costs while living in poverty is a risk factor for homelessness. People with lower housing costs can achieve a higher standard of living than people with the same income but higher housing costs.

Permanently increasing income support payments to protect people from poverty would have an immediate and direct impact on incidences of housing stress and homelessness in Australia.

## Increase income supports to keep people out of poverty

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Maintain the higher rate of JobSeeker
- Maintain JobKeeper for those who need it beyond September.
- Increase Commonwealth Rent Assistance by at least 30% for low-income households currently receiving the maximum rate.
- Expand eligibility for income support and JobKeeper to temporary visa holders.

The pre-COVID rate of Newstart was so low, it trapped people in poverty.<sup>13</sup> As a result, if you were on Newstart, you could not achieve a basic standard of living. Basic daily essentials, including housing, but also food, bills, clothing and public transport, were unaffordable.

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<sup>13</sup> ACOSS and UNSW Sydney, 'Poverty in Australia 2020', March 2020.

Rent assistance has not kept up with the costs of renting in Victoria. Pre-COVID, about 60 per cent of people receiving Newstart and Commonwealth Rent Assistance were in housing stress, spending more than 30 per cent of their income in rent. About 40 per cent of young people receiving Youth Allowance spend more than half their income on rent.

VCOSS members providing emergency relief and material assistance report they are inundated with requests for assistance by community members who do not have enough income to live on, let alone move themselves out of poverty. Demand has increased since the pandemic, with providers reporting that 25% of requests were from people newly unemployed and in financial stress or new to the service.

VCOSS welcomes the increases to income support included in the COVID-19 stimulus packages. These long overdue increases have provided welcome protections to people's financial security and wellbeing during this economic downturn.

As we look towards recovery, we cannot afford to revert back to the old, brutal, rate of \$40 per day. Cutting the income support rates back to old, low rates will force many into poverty, again or for the first time.

We also need to consider the large number of people who do not have access to income support – people on bridging visas, temporary protection visas, international students, people on skilled visas or seasonal worker visas who have lost of their jobs, and some New Zealand citizens.

Maintaining higher levels of income support beyond the pandemic response is essential to preventing ongoing housing stress and protecting people from poverty and homelessness in the long-term.

## Prevent a long-term unemployment crisis

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Pursue recovery and stimulus programs that prioritise employment-intensive growth and yield jobs that can be filled by jobseekers experiencing disadvantage.
- Redesign JobActive to build the skills and capabilities of working-age Australians who are out of work and provide genuine pathways to sustainable employment.

Paid work provides the foundations for a good life, enabling economic participation and social inclusion. Stable and meaningful employment provides people with an income and the ability to maintain housing that is affordable and appropriate to their needs.

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*Direct public investment in social housing construction is one cost-effective and fast way to boost growth in jobs and incomes. For every dollar invested, it is estimated to boost GDP by \$1.30.*

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Unemployment is a key risk factor for homelessness – half of all people using homelessness services were unemployed or not in the labour force in 2018-19.<sup>14</sup>

However it is not the case that ‘any job’ is a good job – insecure and otherwise poor-quality jobs can perpetuate existing inequalities and often cannot protect against the risk of housing stress. Over 17,000 people who used homelessness services in 2018-19 were employed.<sup>15</sup>

The pandemic has exposed the precarious and inequitable nature of our current labour market.

Pre-pandemic, there was only one job available for every five people looking for paid work in Australia.<sup>16</sup> Many Victorians are now employed insecurely and there is an increasing polarisation of employment into high-skilled, high-paying jobs, and low-skilled, low-paying roles.<sup>17</sup> The promotion of independent contracting through the gig economy is an example of insecure work that has flourished in recent times, alongside rising casualisation, sham contracting and labour hire.<sup>18</sup>

Many vulnerable people, particularly those who have multiple disadvantages, have no alternative to insecure work.<sup>19</sup> This includes vulnerable young people, Aboriginal people, people with disability, single parents, older people, women, people with low levels of education, people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, migrants, people living in rural, regional, outer suburban areas, or low socioeconomic communities, and those with a history of contact with the justice system. Finding work will inevitably become harder for these groups, with fewer jobs and rising unemployment anticipated for the foreseeable future.

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<sup>14</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, ‘*Specialist Homelessness Services Data Tables 2018-19*’, December 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, ‘*Specialist Homelessness Services Data Tables 2018-19*’, December 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Joshua Healy & Daniel Nicholson, ‘*The costs of a casual job are now outweighing any pay benefits*’ in *The Conversation*, September 2017

<sup>17</sup> OECD, ‘*OECD Employment Outlook 2017*’, June 2017, p.85.

<sup>18</sup> Frances Flanagan, ‘*Theorising the gig economy and home-based service work*’, *Journal of Industry Relations*, November 2018, p2.

<sup>19</sup> OECD, ‘*OECD Employment Outlook 2014*’, June 2014, p.151.

In this context, the need for effective employment services to support jobseekers, especially those experiencing disadvantage, is more critical than ever.

JobActive is the main Australian Government employment program. Current estimates suggest that as many as 700,000 Australians will soon sign up to the program.<sup>20</sup> JobActive was already under-resourced pre-pandemic and providers will not likely cope with such a surge in demand. Further, the program model is characterised by an excessive focus on compliance and based on the assumption that finding employment should be easy for those with the incentive to do so. As a consequence, most participants receive a standardised, low-level service, instead of the personalised support people experiencing disadvantage in the labour market need.

The pandemic has presented some opportunities which should be explored further in our recovery to increase access to stable work. This includes greater flexibility in the workplace and in education and training systems, which has been beneficial for workers with caring responsibilities, or those with health or disability needs. Remote ways of working, including the use of technology, has created more opportunities for people with disability and engagement and participation of people from rural areas.

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<sup>20</sup> Per Capita, '*Redesigning Employment Services after COVID-19*', April 2020.