Little piece of heaven.
THOUGHTS FROM VICTORIANS ON HOUSING AS A HUMAN RIGHT

THE HOUSING IS A HUMAN RIGHT PROJECT
A collaborative project of VCOS, Shelter Victoria, Women's Housing Ltd & the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions
'Every woman, man, youth and child has the human right to gain and sustain a secure home and community in which to live in peace and dignity.'

UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON ADEQUATE HOUSING

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A collaborative project of VCOSS, Shelter Victoria, Women’s Housing Ltd and the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions.
The Housing is a Human Right Project is a collaborative project of VCOSS, Shelter Victoria, Women’s Housing Ltd and Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE).

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And thank you most of all to the focus group participants who trusted me to do something useful with their stories, especially the man who said: ‘Take all the thoughts on this tape recorder, from people like us, put them together in one general submission and put it to the Government. You’ve got to tell them, because if you don’t tell them, they’re not going to know.’
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Explores issues including isolation and living alone, supported housing, housing for people with disabilities, difficulties accessing housing, public housing waiting lists, consequences for women escaping violence, issues in regional Victoria, discrimination in private rental, ‘fighting’ for housing, choice about housing location, work rights for asylum-seekers, access to health care, social isolation, importance of education, public transport, importance of advocacy and support services, impact of workers’ attitudes, and cultural issues.

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## Secure and affordable

Explores issues including definitions of affordability, proportion of income spent on housing, affordability of essential services, impact of affordability on wellbeing, the ‘poverty trap’ in public housing, choice in where you live and who you live with, ideas for improving affordability, rising costs of private rental, stability and eviction issues in boarding/rooming houses and private rental, losing the home you own, ideas for assisting people to own their homes.

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What is the right to adequate housing?

According to international law, everyone has the right to adequate housing. This doesn’t mean everyone has the right to the house they want. It means everyone has the right to housing that is safe, secure, affordable, accessible and appropriate, and to live there in peace and dignity.

You need adequate housing to exercise your rights to education and to work, to participate in the community, for physical and mental well-being and a decent standard of living. Other rights are particularly important for some communities to have their right to adequate housing met, such as indigenous peoples’ right to land, asylum-seekers’ right to work, and the right of women and children to live free from violence.

International law says you have the right to adequate housing without discrimination, for example because of your gender, sexuality, age, race or culture, disability or mental health status, social status (e.g. being homeless, a parent or unemployed), social origin (e.g. immigration visa status) or the source of your income (e.g. social security).

Australia is bound by international human rights treaties to ‘respect, protect and fulfil’ your right to adequate housing. Federal, State and Territory Governments share these responsibilities. Yet no government has properly implemented them: for example, State and Territory laws do not adequately protect tenants, and housing and homelessness services do not have the resources to ensure everyone has access to adequate housing.

What does the right to adequate housing mean in Victoria?

The Housing is a Human Right Project spoke to many different people around Victoria. They said that for housing to be adequate, it must:

Be safe and habitable.
• Have affordable facilities to keep warm in winter and cool in summer.
• Have clean water, telephone, gas and/or electricity, toilet, washing and garbage facilities.
• Be structurally sound, in a hygienic and safe condition, with repairs attended to promptly.
• Be large enough for the number of people living there.
• Be able to be accessed and used by people of all abilities.
• Offer safety from violence and from the threat of violence.
• Provide privacy and personal space.

Be accessible and appropriate.
• Be accessible to services like shops, health services, schools and employment.
• Be serviced by accessible, affordable and frequent public transport.
• Enable you to create and maintain links with the services you need, family, friends and your community.
• Be of adequate structure and have the appropriate facilities for your cultural needs.
• Your rights and dignity must be respected in the process of obtaining housing and while living in it, and you must be able to obtain adequate housing in a reasonable period of time.

**Be secure and affordable.**

• Provide security and stability.
• You must not be unfairly threatened with eviction or unfairly evicted.
• The cost of your housing must not compromise your basic needs or quality of life. You should not have to pay more than 25% of your income on your total housing costs.

**What can you do?**

The Federal and Victorian Governments have the obligation to make policies and commit adequate funding to ensure that everyone’s right to adequate housing is realised. If your housing doesn’t meet these requirements, then the Federal and Victorian Governments are not fulfilling their obligations. This project is the start of a campaign to lobby governments to ‘respect, protect and fulfil’ the right to adequate housing in Victoria.

To get involved, visit [www.vcoss.org.au](http://www.vcoss.org.au) or contact participating organisations.

- Victorian Council of Social Service  
  9654 5050
- Women’s Housing Ltd  
  9687 1644
- Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions  
  9417 7505
- Tenants Union of Victoria  
  9419 5577
- Supported Accommodation and Rights Service  
  9419 8529
- Housing Resource and Support Service  
  9340 5100
- PILCH Homeless Persons’ Legal Clinic  
  9225 6684
abbreviations

Summary of terms and abbreviations.

**OoH**  Office of Housing (Victoria); also referred to as “public housing”, “Ministry of Housing” or “Housing Commission”

**AHBV**  Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria

**THM**  Transitional Housing Manager (Victoria)

**SAAP**  Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (Federal)

**SRS**  Supported Residential Service

**CRU**  Community Residential Unit

**Centrelink**  Government agency administering the delivery of social security benefits (Federal)

**TICA**  Tenancy database

**CRA**  (Commonwealth) Rent Assistance

**DHS**  Department of Human Services (Victoria)

**TPV**  Temporary Protection Visa

**GST**  Goods and Services Tax

**ATSIC**  Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (Federal)

**VCAT**  Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal

**RTA**  Residential Tenancies Act (Victorian)

**MRC**  Migrant Resource Centre.
The project.

Between March and August 2004, the Housing is a Human Right Project spoke with 185 people, from 65 suburbs around Victoria, about what housing as a human right means to them. Their thoughts – collected in this book – were part of the process of developing the Charter of Housing Rights for Victoria. All quotes are from the focus groups and have been used with the consent of the participants, and no real names have been used.

This introduction to the Project was given at the start of each focus group.

‘This interview is one of about 20 that is being held for the Housing is a Human Right Project. The Project was set up to develop a Charter of Housing Rights for Victoria. International human rights laws say that everyone has the right to adequate housing, simply because we are human, and it’s the responsibility of governments to make sure that this right is fulfilled in their country. Australia has “ratified” the international laws on housing rights, which means we have signed them and accepted them, but we haven’t made laws bringing them into effect in Australia. This means that Federal and State Governments don’t legally have to keep their obligation to ensure that people in Australia have adequate housing, and it means we can’t legally do anything about it when they don’t.

The Project wants to find out what international housing rights mean to people in Victoria, to develop a Charter of Housing Rights that is specific to Victoria, and useful to communities in Victoria. The Charter will help to start a campaign to get the human right to housing recognised in Victoria and in Australia in general. This means lobbying for laws to ensure everyone has access to safe, secure, affordable, accessible and appropriate housing, and increased funding for housing from State and Federal Governments.

The Project is also going to hold a Housing Rights Tribunal in March 2005, which will give people who’ve experienced housing rights violations a chance to talk about their experiences.’

Participants were asked to indicate on their consent forms whether they would like to receive a copy of the Charter, whether they would be interested in participating in the Tribunal, and whether they would like to be involved in an ongoing housing rights campaign.

The focus groups.

Each focus group involved around eight people. Food was provided and each participant received $20. Funding constraints limited the number of consultations in regional Victoria, but we did manage to run groups in Shepparton, Yallourn North and Bendigo. About half the groups were organised through agencies, with the rest organised independently to make sure people felt free to be critical of agencies if they wished.
The Project reference group included 24 organisations, intended to represent a range of communities and regions. Time and resource constraints faced by many smaller organisations (often those representing people from diverse cultural backgrounds) unfortunately meant these communities were under-represented on the reference group, but we compensated through phone and email contact and agency visits to make sure a diversity of communities was involved in the consultation process.

Focus group advertisements asked for people to “have your say on housing as a human right”. We sought out people who had been homeless or were at risk of becoming homeless; people whose housing was not affordable; people living in caravan parks, rooming and boarding houses; people in public housing and in private rental; and people experiencing particular disadvantage such as Indigenous people, people with disabilities, young people, asylum-seekers, new migrants, women and children escaping domestic and family violence, and older people.

We deliberately did not prioritise people who are currently homeless. A number of existing organisations and projects focus on the multiple and complex issues associated with homelessness, and that was not our role. This Project aimed to look at what people feel about their right to adequate housing, and what happens when this right isn’t met. This is sometimes, but not always, homelessness. Many people live in substandard, unaffordable, insecure, inaccessible and unsafe housing and do not “present” as homeless. We wanted to hear their stories too.

The questions.

The focus group questions were based on the seven “standards” of housing adequacy, as defined by the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. These are: habitability, accessibility, availability of services, appropriateness of location, affordability, security of tenure and cultural appropriateness.

Facilitators and note-takers were trained to work with the Project Coordinator to run focus groups. They included social work students, agency workers, and peer interviewers: people who had issues with their housing and who expressed interest in being involved with the focus groups. They received $25 for the training and for each group they facilitated. Some of the most powerful groups were those run by peer interviewers in the communal residences in which they lived.

We brainstormed the meanings of the seven international standards of adequate housing with training participants, using their thoughts on what the definitions meant as “prompts” for focus group participants. For example, the question about habitability was asked as: “Everyone has the right to housing which is habitable. What, if anything, does this mean to you? Some words you might like to think about are: structure, liveable, utilities, safe and decent.” We also asked what people thought needed to change for their right to adequate housing to be realised. Their ideas very much informed the recommendations at the back of this book.
This approach prompted broad and deeply-considered conversations between participants, which really explored what housing as a basic human right – rather than just a service or a commodity – meant to people. Asking questions in this way also brought out responses that spoke very much of what it takes for people to feel they have a home. This is one reason their words are so powerful.

Some reflections.

These are some things that have stayed with me from the consultation process.

• The sheer number of people in Victoria, in so many different circumstances, for whom housing is a problem.
• The depth of feeling expressed by people in telling their stories, particularly by those who had once had housing security, and had it taken away from them.
• The absolutely fundamental place that stable housing has in our lives.
• That so many people knew instinctively that adequate housing is a human right, and were continually reminding me, as one woman said, ‘exactly why this Charter has to be written.’
• Some recurring themes: of respect, of having to “fight” for rights, and the “dog” metaphor: ‘Give a dog a bad name, you may as well shoot it’; ‘If you put people in dog houses, they’ll treat themselves as dogs’; ‘You’re a dog: once you’re down, you’re always down.’
• That a number of people said this was the first consultation they had received payment for, thanking us for the ‘recognition’. One often-consulted community said it was the first time anybody offered to send them the results of a consultation.
• That two organisations contacted me after running a focus group to request letters of support to help them secure ongoing funding.
• That participants from one group – users of the same service who had not previously met – swapped phone numbers at the end of the discussion.
• That a campaign for work rights for asylum-seekers on bridging visas began out of another group.
• That around three-quarters of participants said they wanted to be involved in an ongoing housing rights campaign in Victoria.

This Project will mark the beginning of a campaign for the realisation of the human right to housing in Victoria and Australia. To find out more or to get involved, follow the links to the Housing is a Human Right Project at [http://www.vcoss.org.au](http://www.vcoss.org.au), or contact any of the organisations listed on the Charter of Housing Rights for Victoria at the front of this book.

Rivkah Nissim  
Housing is a Human Right Project Coordinator  
October 2004
safe and habitable.
It should be waterproof, it should be windproof, it should be warm in the winter and cool in the summer.
There are some basic things that every focus group agreed are necessary for housing to be ‘habitable’, ‘liveable’ and ‘decent’. These include: basic amenities such as water, gas, electricity and a phone; being warm in winter and cool in summer; being structurally safe, with repairs attended to promptly; being large enough for the number of people living there; and providing privacy, safety, a sense of security and personal space.

Apart from providing physical comfort and safety, people said that having decent housing is necessary to feel ‘human’. ‘Housing must be ‘clean, presentable, so you can take pride in it’, said Pat in Wantirna. Sharon in Bundoora said that as long as ‘you've got a laundry, you've got a facility where clothes are able to be washed, you're able to maintain a standard of hygiene and your own personal dignity.’

Two subjects that often came up were fences and heating. A number of parents in public housing said that they considered a fence an essential part of the property, but the Office of Housing didn’t. Tara in Bendigo said: '[They said that] the perimeter fence wasn't considered a necessity... It was like, you could wait for six to twelve months [but] I've got an ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder] child that I've had to call the police about six times for, and I had to fight to get a side fence put up between me and the next block. And they've got two dogs!' For Libby from the Thornbury Aboriginal women's group, it was obvious that 'you don't put people in houses on main roads with no front fences! And I've got babies!' she said.

Perhaps because the groups were conducted during Melbourne winter, warmth, and the lack of it, was very much in peoples’ minds. For many, the cost of heating was prohibitive, and utility bills were a major cause of stress. People reported living in boarding houses where landlords raised the rent for heater use – an illegal practice.

A number of people attributed their heating problems to the bad structure and design of their houses. Adina – living in transitional housing in Maribyrnong – said: ‘The house where we live now, it looks pretty good but in the winter it’s really cold inside, so we have just one option: electricity! But it's very expensive, and even though we use all the time our radiator to heat it, it’s still cold because it’s the problem with the building. It’s open everywhere under the door, it’s broken everywhere... we can’t warm this house.’

‘If it gets really too cold, well, there’s only one place to go – to bed.’ Heating and electricity were major issues in Yallourn North, in the Latrobe Valley, where as Phillip said: ‘I don’t [use the lights] anymore. I just switch the telly on and the light from the telly lights the room up. I go and get a nice blanket and put it around me. And if it gets really too cold, well, there’s only one place to go – to bed.’

‘They’ve put heating systems in that are really, really great if you own a gas company, but if you’ve gotta feed the meter or whatever, they’re really not efficient,’ said Carl. Many attributed their heating problems to their house’s structure: ‘A lot of our houses are old timber places... very poorly insulated, fairly dilapidated’, Carl said, as well as being ‘riddled with asbestos’, another major health issue.

Barry described what many in the group saw as their bigger problem: ‘Being a small town, and not very profitable for the gas man or the bus company, we’ve sort of been isolated, pushed aside,’ he said. Living under the Yallourn North power station made this situation sadly ironic.

‘They should realise that we could shut the entire State down with water, electricity and gas if we wanted to,’ said Barry. ‘At the end of the day, it’s a very simplistic system: the country can run without the city, but the city can’t run without the country... It all comes from here and goes there and is sent back to us, if we’re lucky, at inflated prices. It hurts, it really hurts. You’ve got the [gas pipe] line going past, and these guys can’t even tap into it.’

‘You get what you pay for.’ We heard many stories of private rental housing, regardless of its location, being not just inadequate but downright unsafe. In Shepparton, Melton, Thornbury and Footscray people spoke of whitetail spider infestations, mould, broken windows, gas leakages, exposed wiring, and in one case a kitchen cupboard that fell on a visitor’s head. Not to mention cockroaches: from those in rooming and boarding houses, or who had a history of living in the low end of the rental sector, the plea was universal: ‘Nothing with cockroaches!’
Everyone understood that the standard of rental accommodation available to them depended on what they could pay, but said quite clearly that this wasn’t fair. Where rental housing was scarce or inaccessible, people’s options were often limited to caravan parks, described as both unsuitable and unappealing. Kelly in Melton said: ‘When you go to see someone and say, “Look, I have nowhere to stay,” the first thing they offer you is a caravan park. I’ve lived in quite a few caravan parks and that’s what I thought I was going to end up dying in, a caravan park.’

Janet, a youth worker in the Shepparton group said that the main problems with caravans were the cost and condition. ‘They want exorbitant prices for the caravans, but they leak, and the benches are falling apart, and the windows are broken, and the owners say “Oh I didn’t realise it wasn’t cleaned up, I didn’t realise that was broken” [though] this is the third week you’ve been out there and they tell you the same thing.’

Most people felt that habitability issues in the private rental sector came down to a lack of standards and regulation. They felt that because owners knew they were on a low income, they could be taken advantage of. As Robert in Wantirna put it: ‘There’s no housing problem if you’ve got large pockets full of money!’

‘Because the Office of Housing has such a long waiting list, people need to find a place to live,’ said Kim in Footscray. ‘Therefore landlords can get away with presenting a property in any way they choose to because they know they will be able to rent it out’. This puts a real strain on people. Debbie in Shepparton described her landlord’s attitude when she ‘ripped into him because the fumigators haven’t come and it’s been a month. He was like, “You get what you pay for.” And I just cracked it, I burst into tears.’

A number of women with children in Footscray talked about trying to find adequate private rental they could afford. ‘I had to weigh up income and how much of it I was prepared to spend on rent, because I was not going to be able to rent a property, with four children, for under $200 [per week] that was acceptable to me,’ said Rosa. ‘So I had to look for a property around the $250 a week mark … because I refuse to let my children live in squalor.’

Kim felt that people in their situation should be protected. ‘I think landlords get away with providing accommodation at a cost that is too high, for something that is not appropriate to live in, particularly if you have children …there should be some sort of body that inspects the property before it goes on the rental market, instead of someone just being able to buy a house and advertise it and ask money for it. You have a lot of desperate people who will live in that because they don’t want to be on the street with children’.

Focus groups had many practical ideas of how the sector could be regulated. They suggested periodic inspections of rental properties, legislation to stop
landlords renting additional properties if their first property was not in decent condition, and legislation requiring repairs be done within a reasonable time or tenants entitled to a rent reduction. Robert in Wantirna felt that regulation of the industry – a massive commercial sector – was simply common sense: ‘If you want to sell fruit,’ he said, ‘you’ve got to have accreditation to sell that fruit. If you’re going to be a landlord, [you] should have accreditation.’

‘I don’t have my right, because every time, they shut me up.’

Habitability issues were not limited to private rental. A number of people living in public housing had had problems with the standard of their properties and getting maintenance done. According to Ellen, a long-term public housing resident in the West, ‘If you ring them [the Office of Housing] about anything they’ll say ‘Oh it’s not my job’, and they’re quite rude. If you ring them with complaints, they keep saying you’re a nuisance . . . I tell them, ‘it IS your job . . . I’m not an idiot like you’re making out I am, I know what I’m talking about.’

Hodan, a participant in the Thornbury Arabic women’s focus group, had had similar experiences with her Area Office: ‘If I go to complain they say you should go and thank God that you have a house, other people are homeless . . . Every time that I go and put complaint, they shut me [up] in this way, so I leave. I don’t have my right, because every time, they shut me up.’

Mina in Thornbury was paying $187 per week for a two-bedroom Office of Housing flat. She had applied for a transfer because ‘It is not healthy at all’ – her toilet was in very bad condition. Once the toilet was flooded and the Office of Housing told her that she and her two children should use the toilet in their neighbour’s flat. ‘I put complaint, they say still you have to wait. Now [I] finish the two years and I’m still waiting.’

Residents felt that the system ignored them at its, and their, peril. Emma in Bendigo’s roof caved in during a storm. ‘The landlords and the Housing Commission need to listen to us,’ she said. ‘I was saying it’s not safe, the roof’s going to fall in, and they weren’t listening.’

Sometimes staff tried to be helpful and ended up doing more harm than good. Pami in Thornbury was once a housing officer with the Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria. She said that many housing officers tell prospective tenants, ‘“Take the house as it is, if you don’t take it, it will go to somebody else, but if you do take it, we’ll fix all these things that are wrong with it – and we promise you”. [But] they can’t promise you anything! They don’t know what the budget is, but they’re pushing these people into houses that aren’t properly maintained. Some of these houses were falling down around these tenants but we couldn’t do anything about it, and our budget wouldn’t fix these houses either.’

‘Use-ability and adaptability.’

For people with special needs, the habitability of a house depends on whether it meets their needs. This was clearly stated in groups involving people with disabilities and their carers. Ken in Bundoora spoke about his son, who is spastic and quadriplegic: ‘What I find is a bit frustrating is the fact that [private homes] are not built to accommodate a handicapped person. You have problems with a small bathroom: it’s adequate for a “normal” adult to get into, [but] we have to get two people into the toilet, Tim and a helper . . . We can’t bathe Tim because we can’t get into the bathroom, so he has to shower. We’ve had to take the shower doors off, to make more room.’

People said that property modifications were expensive for those who owned their home, and impossible for those in private rental. Azara in the Reservoir Arabic women’s group told us about her situation: ‘I have disabled child and if I want to add all the rails and handles for my child I can’t put this, because it is not my house . . . At four years old she’s scared to go to the toilet by herself, my little baby, because there is nothing to hold on to. I am carrying her so much all the time.’ Azara said she has been on the waiting list for public housing for ten years. Another woman in the group whose child has epilepsy said: ‘The child is from God, the sickness is from God . . . we need help from the Government.’
There is a real lack of adequate modified housing in Victoria. Kate works with a disability housing support service: ‘I’ve met a number of consumers [whose] housing is just barely habitable. You’d think the Office of Housing should [be] the standard that other places achieve, whereas it’s not . . . . They basically give you the box and it’s like “be grateful that you’ve got the box”.

Incredibly, modified public housing properties are not reserved for people with disabilities. They go to whoever is first on the waiting list, even though so few properties are modified and the waiting list of people who need them is long. It is an aspect of Office of Housing policy that Kate’s service is trying to change.

People felt that more adaptable properties would help many people, catering for people’s different needs over their lifetime. ‘It’s the nature of disabilities,’ Kate said. ‘Someone gets a priority house, at that time their life is perfect but ten years down the track, it might not be.’ Annette in Bundoora said: ‘[Housing has] got to change as we change, and structurally not every house is able to do that’, she said. ‘So it’s [about] accessibility, but also use-ability and adaptability’.

The structure of housing was very important to participants in the Aboriginal women’s focus group. For them, it came down to cultural appropriateness. Rachel explained: ‘For many of our families, if there’s a funeral or something like that, we all have to travel and we stay with people, and vice versa. On the weekend I had fifteen people in my house . . . So the style of the houses need to be looked at, in terms of the rooms and the size, but also the Office of Housing in general should recognise the cultural needs of Aboriginal people and make allowances for those occasions where people are accommodating other families. Even if they come down to hospital, often they come to stay with us because there’s just no services out there to support them.’

Participants in this group suggested more bedrooms and extra toilets, and all said a bungalow out the back for travellers and the elderly and younger family members would be a good thing. One woman said that people need to think more broadly about what housing means: ‘My parents wanted to move back to the riverbank and live in a hut and they weren’t allowed to. So [what’s needed is] that recognition, of what is a shelter, so if people want to go back to their land near the river, they can.’

‘Safety, security and your well-being. Three vital things.’

Issues of structural adequacy were important to everyone. However one aspect of habitability was even more important to a number of people. Many women across the focus groups had left situations of domestic or family violence – for them, safety was the highest priority. Emma from the Bendigo group summed it up: ‘Safety, security and your well-being. Three vital things.’

Charmaine had moved from Taylor’s Lakes to Melton to escape a violent partner. Her first concern ‘was just safety. I just made sure everything was [able to be] locked up,’ she said. ‘I didn’t even care what it looked like inside as long as I was in there and he could not get in there, because I had a restraining order but that didn’t stop him. He was God, he was going to get in . . . . It was all about making sure the kids were safe, because he threatened to kill us all.’ Women in such situations said that security screens and window and door locks were essential for their housing to be habitable.

The issue of violence was also raised by a number of men in communal residential services. Gary described feeling trapped in a cycle: ‘Just when I look like I’m getting on my feet, I’ve been assaulted. I live in an all-male rooming house and I tend to speak up for myself, I won’t be intimidated by anyone, and I will speak up for other people who aren’t as fit or as strong as what I am. So it means I often become a target. I’ve been seriously assaulted once every twelve months in the last ten years, assaulted seriously enough that it’s prevented me from working, and that has kept me in this situation.’

John has experienced the frustration and stress of a similar vicious cycle: ‘I live in a boarding house . . . . the only boarding house I’ve ever lived in. My intention was always to stay there for six months, get a job, get myself back on my feet and get back into the mainstream, [but] I’ve spent the last nearly three years protecting and defending myself and I’ve spent so much energy doing it that it’s actually prevented me from staying in jobs. That’s the irony of it. It’s a catch 22 situation.’
‘If you come home at the end of the day and you don’t have a safe place, you go insane.’

Safety was important to a number of other people, including the group of recently-arrived migrants from Serbia we spoke with in Dandenong. As their worker explained, ‘Most of these people come from torture and trauma background. [They are] very nervous people.’

The stress of living in an unsafe area was frequently raised by young people living on their own. Many worried about being broken into but couldn’t afford to live in a ‘good area’. One young woman in Shepparton said: ‘If you come home at the end of the day and you don’t have a safe place, you go insane.’

For many people the threat was external, for example crime or roughness of the neighbourhood. For rooming and boarding house residents, the threat often came from within their living environment. Some residents of a Richmond women’s boarding house cited safety as one of their main reasons for being in single-sex accommodation. ‘I do think that we need more places that are priced like this, and for women only’, said one. ‘I don’t think that all low-income people should be lumped together,’ said another. ‘I think most of the alternatives for low-income people involve situations where there are . . . illicit drug users who maybe are involved in criminal activities and that puts the safety of everyone at risk’.

‘Where’s the duty of care . . .?’

Other focus groups for people in communal residences also focussed on safety. They included residents of a Footscray supported residential service, users of a support and advocacy service for rooming and boarding house residents, and men in a North Melbourne crisis facility. Their concern was the lack of responsibility and accountability that landlords of both private and community-run rooming and boarding houses have to their often-vulnerable residents. As Brian said about his supported residential service: ‘Where’s the duty of care in providing support? Where’s our human rights?’ David asked: ‘Are landlords providing more than just a roof over our heads? You put people into rooms and they’re left to die there, some of them.’

John told the story of this happening ‘in a place I was living in. I don’t know who [was] responsible for this gentleman who was renting the room but he never came out of his room. As a matter of fact he died in his room. And it was a good week, maybe a week and a half, before anyone cottoned onto what was going on. I think there’s a lack of serviceability for people in that situation.’ John thought that ‘maybe somebody once a week should be checking on these [elderly] people, make sure they’re still breathing.’

This topic raised some very emotional responses. ‘I’ve rung the [Department] so many times saying this woman has dementia,’ said Tracy of a neighbour in her rooming house. ‘She doesn’t even recognise us anymore, she’s losing body weight, she’s going through rubbish bins, she...’
needs care. Nothing ever happens! Does this woman need to die before [anything happens]? And if she dies, it’s over and done with! So where is the responsibility of the landlord when you report these things? It’s just a responsibility to another human being . . . A moral responsibility, of a decent human being.’

David felt it should be a legal responsibility. ‘If you’re driving down the road and you hit a person in a car, you’re liable for manslaughter,’ he said. ‘If you have a person living under your roof and he’s screaming out “Help” and you don’t open the door, nobody cares.’

‘. . . if she was regulated, she’d be out of business.’

Rooming house residents said that most of their problems with safety, standards and their landlords’ behaviour were due to a lack of regulation. They were very clear about what needed to be done. ‘There should be a governing body set up to control and service the registered rooming houses or anyone who proposes to register a rooming house in the future,’ said John in Fitzroy. ‘The only way it could possibly work [would be] if it is policed on a regular basis, with set fines put in place for people who go outside those guidelines.’

Tracy agreed: ‘So there’s a licensing system or some kind of registration process, and there’s a code of conduct that must be followed . . . and police checks on rooming house owners!’

This last point was highlighted by a support worker, who mentioned a landlord – about whom they continually received complaints – who apparently has 54 criminal convictions.

Participants agreed that regulations must be enforced. Some thought this should be the local council’s role, others that the police should work with the local council. Service users and workers agreed that the current system was not working. A story was told in the Fitzroy group about one landlord who was known to a number of the participants. ‘I find the legislation is not quite hard enough against owners,’ said Gary. ‘I had a situation last year where . . . I contacted [the service] about something and the local council came down and they closed the place down on the Friday night.’

‘It was the fourth time they’ve closed the same place down,’ said Shannon, one of the workers. ‘The landlord came back from her holiday and accused me specifically of sabotaging the home,’ said Gary. ‘Ended up taking it to court. I got awarded a paltry amount, sheriff’s office ended up going there and she cried poor. She owns two properties, she’s got nine tenants living in both properties . . .’

‘She’s receiving Social Security benefits,’ Tracy added. ‘She’s been on A Current Affair twice, ten years apart,’ said Gary. ‘We’ve had her in the Magistrates Court for an oral summons. All she did was cry,’ said Shannon. ‘It’s not just the money, it’s the principle,’ Gary said. ‘Now this particular woman, if she was regulated, she’d be out of business. Government has to follow it through.’

‘Where you got the key to your door, and no-one else has got the key to your door.’

Less concrete than structure, less definable than safety, but just as important are issues like privacy, personal space, and a sense of ownership. For some this means actual home ownership. For others, it’s simply a space of their own. This point was raised most often by people living in large accommodation facilities, many of whom had been homeless. The metaphor of “shutting the door” was often used by people to signify the defining of their own space, where they have control. As Iris in the aged peoples’ housing group said, ‘It’s somewhere where you can shut the door and feel you’ve got a little space of your own, and you’re only answerable to yourself.’

At the North Melbourne men’s crisis service, Ben – who looked to be in his early thirties – described this as the goal of his already long history of housing instability. ‘What about when you’ve been institutionalised?’ he asked. ‘When you’ve come from a boys home and then you’ve gone to a youth refuge, and then you’ve gone to another boys home, and then you’ve gone to jail, and then you’ve gone to rehab, and then you’ve gone to a men’s hostel . . . you’re just stuck in the frigging system for so long. You look [at] how unstable your life’s been, you know, pushed on, pushed on . . . you just get pushed along.’ When asked what he thought would change that, Ben responded instantly, ‘Rights. Rights for housing . . . Where you got your solid concrete. Where you got your place, mate. Where you got your key to your door, and no-one else has got the key to your door.’
accessible and appropriate.
two
accessible and appropriate

‘There’s not enough housing, mate. At the end of the day, there’s not!’
We asked about accessibility, appropriateness of location and availability of services in the one question. The responses were interesting. For people with disabilities, for example, accessibility was mostly an issue of habitability: whether they could physically live in a place. Most participants’ take on accessibility, however, focussed on how hard it was to get the housing they needed: long waiting lists, discrimination, and a lack of appropriate services. People often defined appropriateness of location by the availability of essential services: public transport, schools, and affordable health care.

“That’s the most basic human right, that you should never have to spend even one night on the street.”

Finding appropriate housing had posed major issues for most participants across the focus groups. People talked about various problems accessing their existing housing, but many also talked about simply not being able to access the right ‘kind’ of housing for their needs.

Every group involving young people, older people, single men and single women said there should be more affordable one-bedroom properties, as so many people – by choice or circumstance – live alone. The lack of accommodation for ‘single blokes’ was particularly highlighted. One woman with a recently-divorced adult son even said that single men aged 18 to 55 are ‘the most discriminated-against group’ in that they do not meet the criteria of most ‘targeted’ housing assistance programs. The lack of options mean a number end up long-term in places like the North Melbourne crisis accommodation service, as Steve explained:

“There’s not enough facilities for single blokes, you know? What about the poor old bloke who’s been married for 25 years and he’s broken up with his wife... he’s never lived in this sort of environment before. Or what about the bloke who grew up in this sort of environment all his life?”

Steve felt the problem is simple. ‘There’s not enough housing, mate. At the end of the day, there’s not.’

Residents of the Richmond women’s boarding house thought there should be more communal housing for older women who did not want to live alone. Maggie said she had been surprised by the different reasons women had for living there: ‘[Many said they] were here, not because of lack of income – they had quite good jobs – but for safety reasons, and companionship. They didn’t feel safe living alone in a one-bedroom flat, and they were very lonely... if there was a program that was building places I think [it should] have very close consultation with people like ourselves... we’re very experienced!’

Dorothy agreed: ‘We need more places like this for all types of people who actually want to live here!... because it’s a fun place, because there’s a wide range of women that we can go out and do things with and talk to, and get to know, and learn from.’

“We all need that bit of help!”

A number of groups raised the need for appropriate supported housing. The Thornbury Aboriginal women’s group said a place was needed where Indigenous women could stay overnight or longer. Rachel said that her organisation had been operating such a shelter out of its own money, but had been unable to secure Government funding to keep it running. ‘They’ve given us transitional housing [properties] but the problem is that some of our women have got high and complex needs and actually need support, because they’ve been homeless for such a long time... Not everybody can live on their own.’

Some men in the North Melbourne crisis service echoed her words in terms of the support people need to get back on their feet. Larry and John, both middle-aged, had similar stories. Larry described himself as ‘more exceptional than the rule’: ‘I was wiped out by a fire. I was self-employed, never been on unemployment benefits in my life until two days ago. But, in my mind, I’m still the same as you [gesturing around the circle], and you, and everybody.

‘We all need that bit of help!’ He felt the three months’ length of stay wasn’t long enough for getting back on your feet: ‘It’s not just about three months if you’re talking about a person’s life!’
John said he was ‘in the same boat’ as Larry: ‘I’ve never had to go through this before. I walked out of school at thirteen and a half ... and I walked into a factory, worked [there] for about forty-five years. Now take these blokes here. They’ve got drug and alcohol problems – I’ve met all of them, they’re good blokes! And they need bloody help. But me and Larry have never been in this situation so we’re finding it harder. Because we’re used to being on our feet, and always having somewhere to live, and money in our pockets ... we’re finding it hard to cope.’

The Project did not set out to talk with people in crisis accommodation, however a number of people we spoke to had been homeless and were living in crisis facilities, rooming houses and supported residential services. They raised a number of issues around the need for supported accommodation, more crisis services, and appropriate housing for people with mental health, drug and alcohol problems. They said that when rehabilitation and mental health residential services are closed down, the people living there often become homeless. Clearly there need to be sufficient crisis accommodation services. A young woman in Bendigo, who had, as she put it, ‘found myself homeless many, many times,’ said: ‘That’s wrong, that’s really wrong, that you can be turned away from crisis centres. That’s THE most basic human right, that you should never have to spend even one night on the street.’

‘There’s the waiting list, and the “urgent” waiting list, and the “urgent, URGENT” waiting list!’

Another group who talked about the lack of supported housing were older people with disabilities. A Bundoora group involving service users, carers and a support worker focussed on the restructuring of aged and disability services. Christine, the worker, felt that ‘the way we accommodate people with disabilities is gradually changing. There’s a focus more on individualised support and “plans” ... [but] half the problem in trying to try new things [is] that there isn’t any extra funding going into the old things.’

Christine was talking particularly about the lack of new funding for community residential units (CRUs). Participants explained that the demand for this type of accommodation is high – ‘There’s the waiting list, and the “urgent” waiting list, and the “urgent, URGENT” waiting list!’ – and that there are never enough vacancies to service the need. This is a huge problem, as Christine said: ‘For the majority of carers, the government-funded CRUs ... are pretty much their only option [because they know that] having got that, their child will then be supported for the rest of their life, pretty much, and won’t be homeless, and will have adequate care. And yet there’s so little of them available.’
Christine felt this shortage is part of a bigger problem: ‘I think the problem with [our government] is that they’ve gone as far as certain entitlements, but they haven’t gone the whole way. This is where the housing inadequacy comes in . . . and because a lot of [people with disabilities] don’t have a voice, [they’re] not taken any notice of.’

‘Unless you’ve got a label you’re not going to get help.’

People who did not need such support also expressed frustration at trying to access services to help them find housing. This was a focus of the Melton discussion, between people who had found transitional housing through linking in with the local housing support service. It was clear that not receiving help with the “simple” problem of needing housing can lead to more complex problems.

Jo and Angela were two young mothers in that group. Jo felt she had been lucky to find the Melton service having been turned away from a number of agencies because, she felt, ‘unless you’ve got a label, you’re not going to get help. Other places we’ve been to, you don’t fit the criteria,’ she said, ‘You’re not a drug addict, you’re not pregnant, you’re not being abused, you’re not living out on the street . . . then when these things DID happen to me, I still didn’t fit the criteria!’

Angela had found that her situation had to get to crisis point before she received assistance: ‘It wasn’t until my family broke up till I could get a service. I’d be saying “I need somewhere to live, I can’t cope with this anymore” . . . all I wanted was somewhere stable so I could say [to my kids] “This is it, boys, this is where we live”, but it took three years before I could get anybody to listen. Meanwhile everybody’s . . . screaming, the whole unit busted up . . . They don’t even class you as homeless because you’re living with family, but it wasn’t comfortable for anybody.’

‘They need to look at the system now and see that it’s just not working.’

The length of the wait for public housing was a source of great stress and frustration for many people. According to Steve in the North Melbourne men’s crisis service, ‘It’s just a whole fucking waiting game and you just don’t have no answer . . . [While] you’re waiting for a house, you could be fucking dead. You’re desperate for a house, transitional housing, Ministry of Housing, you don’t get no answer.’

Ellen in Footscray felt the same: ‘We just don’t know what’s going on. They [the Office of Housing] don’t tell us.’

‘Unless you’ve got a label, you’re not going to get help.
You’re not a drug addict, you’re not pregnant, you’re not being abused, you’re not living out on the street . . . then when these things DID happen to me, I still didn’t fit the criteria!’
Others had had enough. ‘We don’t want them [the Office of Housing] any more,’ said Hodan in the Arabic women’s group. ‘We want cheap rent we could afford . . . that’s all.’ ‘We not waiting for them to get us [out of] this situation any more,’ said Azara.

Rosa, who had left a domestic violence situation, said she felt an acceptable waiting period for people needing housing was ‘six weeks, I reckon. Even that might be too long, depending on the circumstances of each individual.’

‘There does have to be some kind of a waiting list,’ acknowledged Jenny in Melton, ‘but they need to look at the system now and see that it’s just not working.’ What increased the frustration was that many people, including workers, said they knew of public and transitional housing properties in their neighbourhood ‘sitting vacant’ for months.

‘The list wouldn’t be nearly as long if they just moved things along a bit,’ said Cathy in Bendigo. ‘It doesn’t take three months to do maintenance.’ ‘You could build a house in three months!’ responded Emma.

A Melton worker said their service had been trying to do something about the length of time it took for properties to be reallocated, and about making the transition to permanent housing as easy as possible. This would require the Office of Housing being prepared to listen to policy recommendations from services: ‘I’ve always wanted this for the clients: they move into transitional [housing] and when their Office of Housing offer comes up we take that [property] as a transitional housing [property] and they stay in the house. I think that would be really good, especially for people . . . with children in school close by [and people] who have to be involved with six or seven support services. It’s a real problem: people have knocked back their Office of Housing offers [for these reasons] and then they get evicted from transitional housing.’

‘I can do whatever I want to her because I know she’s going to stay.’

Women in the group organised through a Footscray family violence housing project discussed the consequences for them and their children of not finding housing soon enough. Erin had been in transitional housing for a year, but was forced to consider returning to her abusive ex-partner because, she said, ‘I couldn’t find a house to rent in the price range that I could afford.’ Rosa had left domestic violence but was not as fortunate: ‘I went to SASHS [Salvation Army Social Housing Service], I went everywhere, and I could not get [anything] . . . On many occasions I found it so hard that I just said, all right, I’m going to go back to my partner, and if he’s doing this [mimes abuse], I’m just going to shut my mouth.’

Sarah had faced the same limited choice: ‘You [think], I have a house, I have everything here, OK I have to put up with this [violence] but the alternative is homelessness. Should you be in a situation when you stay, so that you don’t have to face that?’

Rosa responded ‘And you know what? A lot of our partners know that: “Oh well, she’s going to come back to me because it’s hard for her to . . . to lift herself up. So I can do whatever I want to her because I know she’s going to stay.” So I think there should be some kind of housing scheme for parents that have come out of a violent situation . . . where you don’t have to wait six to twelve months.’

Libby in the Aboriginal women’s group raised the same issue but had a different solution: ‘A lot of our women have to leave their homes because of domestic violence, and I’d like to see . . . sole occupancy [orders] so that the man has to be removed for a period of time. Why move the women and children? Because the onus is always placed on the women . . . I’m not saying that all men are violent, because we have violent women too, but regardless of whether the perpetrator’s male or female, [they] need to be moved on because [otherwise] what are we saying? We’re saying violence is against the law, but we’ll take you and the children away!’ Deb said that if a woman didn’t leave a violent situation, ‘child protection will take her children. You lose your kids because that person won’t leave you alone.’

For women in these situations, their children’s safety and stability were their priority. Sarah in Footscray summed up what that could mean for a woman who had left but couldn’t find housing: ‘If you’ve got a woman who’s considering going back to the situation because of what she’s up against in starting again, that’s an indication of how difficult it is. If you can’t find a house and . . . you have to go months and months and months of looking and being rejected, if you can’t find a decent house to raise your children in . . . then the chances are you do consider going back.’
‘They assume – well, they know – that you can barely survive, depending on how you manage your money.’

According to the people we spoke to, discrimination in the private rental market is rife. In every group, metropolitan and regional, people reported knock-back after knock-back. Most were clear that they were being rejected largely because of their circumstances, or “social status”, which is not prohibited under either Federal or State anti-discrimination law.

Adina, a recent migrant who is trying to move from transitional housing in Maribyrnong, said of herself and her daughter: ‘We are on social benefits and we receive help from this agency [a rental subsidy], so when we went with agents and we said “We are going to be paying our rent in this way”, they straight away said “Oh the house is ...” something or other! They don’t want to bother with us. So it’s really impossible for us to find a house.’

Rosa in the outer Western suburbs described her view of real estate agents’ attitude towards single mothers: ‘Discrimination, you do get [it] from a lot of people when you say to them, “Look, I’m a sole parent with kids, I’m on a pension”. They assume – well, they know – that you can barely survive, depending on how you manage your money.’

One Footscray man said, ‘The minute you say you’re on the pension, they don’t want to bother with you.’ He had taken to telling agents that he ‘worked for the Government’ – ‘Being on Centrelink IS working for the dole!’

‘Over 300 rental properties and you can’t find a house.’

Participants in Bendigo and Shepparton identified particular issues faced by people in the country. Belinda in Bendigo said, ‘I’ve found definitely in country areas – I’m from Mildura [and I’ve] lived a long time in Bendigo – there’s one very specific thing. Rural areas have a very strong closed system when it comes to private real estate. They have very definite likes and dislikes, and you’ve got no hope of getting in if you’re a single mother ... They all talk, you know? There was general agreement from others in the group. ‘If it’s through a real estate, you’re stuffed basically,’ another woman said.

Janet, a Shepparton youth service worker, commented that ‘It’s really interesting that there’s over 300 rental properties available in Shepparton and everyone has the same view – you can’t find a house.’ She spoke of a number of users from her service who had been “blacklisted”: ‘We’ve had quite a few young people come through here that have been on the TICA [tenancy database] list and [we] had to go through quite a process to get them off that. Often people have addressed whatever those issues are [that caused them to be listed] but they [still] can’t find accommodation.’

Marion in Shepparton was certain that she was being rejected because ‘I’ve got a daughter with a disability and they won’t give us a private rental house because of it. As soon as they hear the word ‘disability’, that’s it,’ she said.

A number of the participants in a Footscray group lived in a supported residential service that houses many people with drug, alcohol, mental health and behavioural issues. They knew that when they put their current address on rental applications, assumptions were made about them. Karen said that she had applied for housing ‘fifteen times, and I was denied, because I put down that I lived [there], and they didn’t want to know.’

Participants talked about how hard it was to move into stable independent accommodation when they were stereotyped. Mark described his accommodation as ‘hell on wheels. But there’s only so many options available for people who are below par,’ he said. ‘Each one of us has got our own history ... but we don’t have to put up with shit, but we do [put up with it] because we’re “down there”. We’re trying to get ourselves back up now, to what the community thinks is decent living ... and they don’t give you a chance to do that.’ Donna described it more bluntly: ‘You’re treated like dogs, you sleep with dogs, you wake up with fleas, and that’s the way you’re going to get treated.’
‘[My daughter] will be, like, sixteen and I will still [have to] carry her.’

Many people excluded from private rental saw public housing as their only option. Iris, an older public housing tenant, said, ‘I think public housing should be available to anybody that wants it. Why should real estate agents, wealthy men and women, have the right to look at you and write down all your personal details and decide if you are good enough?’

For those in private rental that didn’t meet their needs, public housing is the only option. These are people with disabilities – or family members with disabilities – who require modified housing. They simply cannot afford to own a home, where they could make their own property modifications. For them, the wait for appropriate public housing was especially hard.

In a Reservoir focus group of eight Arabic-speaking women, four had been on the public housing waiting list for ten to fifteen years. Three had children with disabilities. Azara, whose four-year-old has a physical disability, was close to giving up: ‘There is no hope for me. She will be, like, sixteen and I will still [have to] carry her’ because her house has stairs and an inaccessible toilet.

Mary in Bundoora is in her early 40’s and has an intellectual disability. She has been waiting for public housing for almost 10 years. ‘I reckon it’s disgusting,’ she said. ‘I’m on the waiting list but they can’t put me up. I’m trying to get out from my parents. Very stressful . . .’

Mary’s worker agreed that the situation was unbearable: ‘They’ve had enough and she’s had enough, and they still have nowhere [she can] go that she can afford, and that’s sustainable in terms of being appropriate in meeting her needs.’

‘I had to fight them like an army fights people.’

It was striking how often, in a number of groups, people described their efforts to obtain housing that meets their needs as a ‘fight’. This was particularly true for people with disabilities, and for carers. John from North Melbourne described the process of finding somewhere appropriate for his son, who has a ‘mild intellectual disability’: ‘I went through Human Services – I had to fight them like an army fights people, to get him what he’s got. He’s got his own unit and everything, now . . . but Human Services are some of the vermin of the earth. You never seen nothing like those people . . . They got nothing inside here [points to his chest], no heart, nothing. You’re talking to ’em, it’s like you’re talking to a machine. You just cannot get through to them.’

Kate, a disability advocacy worker and a service user herself, said of working with the Office of Housing to obtain appropriate accommodation for her ‘consumers’: ‘I shouldn’t be fighting them, they should be working with us. And they’re not.’

Diane, also a worker and service user, said she had ‘had so many fights over the last six, seven years trying to get housing . . . you re-fight the same thing because they [the Office of Housing] have forgotten it or it’s been put in the wrong box or something.’ She worries about people who aren’t as articulate or aware of their rights, or who don’t know how to “work the system”: ‘What happens if you’re not a worker [or] if you’re not an assertive person? Many people will stop at the first hurdle.’ Kate and Diane summed up the problem: ‘You have to fight for everything, instead of its being a right.’

‘You should be given a choice.’

Many people said that it was essential their housing was in an appropriate location for it to be adequate, which meant being able to access essential services. There was general agreement about what these are: public transport, supermarkets, affordable health care services, schools and child care, as well as the community networks that people particularly need. Many people had special needs around particular services; for them it was extremely important that their links to those services not be broken.
A common complaint was not being able to choose the location of housing, especially public housing, where applicants have to choose between ‘broadband’ areas rather than specific suburbs, and often have to take the first property offered to them. Kelly in Melton explained why this was a problem for her: ‘When I ticked Melton for “priority one”, [my housing worker] said to me that most likely you’ve got these other places [where you could be offered a house] – Werribee, Hoppers Crossing – places where I didn’t want to be . . . I don’t know nobody over there, and I’m going through court at the moment – I NEEDED to be in Melton because of all my supports here.’

A participant in Bendigo said the ability to choose your housing location was a right: ‘The quality of housing is not the four walls and . . . what colour they are. It’s where it is. You should be given a choice.’

For the asylum-seekers we spoke to – on bridging visas without the right to work or receive social security – choosing their housing was impossible. They were being housed by charities or non-government organisations. While all expressed their appreciation, they also – especially those who had not always been in such a situation – spoke of how disempowering it was. ‘I came to Australia in 1996,’ said Mohamed. ‘I was working for a good company. In that time I [could] rent where I want – close to the school, close to work. After I lost the work rights, I was in Essendon. From Essendon I had to come to Kew, from Kew I had to go to Canterbury, from Canterbury now I have come to Box Hill. And we can’t say no.’ However, as for the other participants in these groups, housing was of lesser importance to Mohamed than not being able to work. ‘If we have work rights and we are working,’ he said, ‘then we can talk about housing.’

‘Perhaps they’ll put it next to the hospital and make it right out of reach!’

In the women asylum-seekers group, not being entitled to Medicare was as great a source of stress as not being allowed to work, especially for those with children. As Armina said, ‘I have the children, anything happen, where do I go to?’

Having access to affordable health care was of great importance in every group. This was especially true for older people, people with particular medical needs, and those in non-metropolitan areas. For people on low incomes, access to bulk-billing doctors was very important. The lack of bulk-billing doctors and the resulting need for community health centres was raised by participants in the Footscray and Dandenong groups.

The Indigenous women’s group raised the issue of needing access to culturally-appropriate medical services. Libby said that moving to somewhere like Roxburgh Park – where she and others she knew had been offered housing – would put the Aboriginal Health Service out of their reach. Trish already lived out that way and found it difficult:
‘If you’re a single mum and you’re going through a bad time, you’re feeling depressed … when you do ring services they haven’t got the resources or staff to get out to you.’ For this group, appropriate locations are ones that are ‘central’.

Olga, an older Serbian woman in Dandenong, said a number of times how desperate she was to find housing in Oakleigh. The doctor treating her for stomach cancer was in Oakleigh: he knew her situation and spoke her language. Oakleigh may not be very far from Dandenong, but it is a difficult journey to make frequently if you are elderly and ill.

For Pat in Wantirna, being close to health services she and her husband need is her main reason for living where she does: ‘I’m my husband’s carer and I have been for nearly 20 years. We probably could have moved out further [than Ringwood] and paid less rent [but] I don’t drive. My husband doesn’t drive. How would we get to the hospital, to his heart specialist, to his doctor? You have no choice when you’re in our position. You just have to do it.’

The Yallourn North group spoke about the impact when the main town of Yallourn was demolished. ‘A lot of the things that we depend on … have been taken away, and that renders the location of the houses inappropriate,’ said Carl. ‘Our schools have been shifted out of our town … They’ve shifted our hospital, they’ve shifted our Council premises two towns away. The hospital’s inaccessibility was almost a standing joke in Yallourn North. Complaining that the local Office of Housing office had been moved to ‘the arsehole end’ of Morwell, Bill joked ‘Perhaps next move, they’ll put it next to the hospital and make it RIGHT out of reach!’

‘You feel like the walls are caving in on you.’

Isolation was raised as a health and safety issue, particularly for many women we spoke to. The Aboriginal women’s and disability advocates’ groups talked about isolation being primarily caused by peoples’ housing being in the ‘wrong’ place. This was a problem for a number of Kate’s clients at the disability housing service because, she said, the Office of Housing can’t afford to purchase many inner city or inner urban properties, so acquire them ‘out in the sticks’. This compromises people’s safety as transport in outlying areas is largely inaccessible, and they are far away from family and other supports. Yet there are so few disability-modified properties that they often have no choice but to accept them. Diane found herself in such a situation: ‘I’ve lived in the Brunswick area for over a decade [but] when housing first came up for me it was in Broadmeadows. This would have been devastating because all my services, everything I get is in the Brunswick area. So to send me to that area, it didn’t matter what sort of house it was, it just would have been disastrous.’

According to some women in the Western suburbs, isolation could be countered by providing appropriate services. Charmaine moved to Melton to get away from her abusive ex-partner. Her kids were fitting in well in their new school, but she hadn’t anticipated the impact the move would have on her: ‘I didn’t realise that it was so isolated! You get so lonely, you feel … like the walls are caving in on you.’

Jo said there should be community services to help people to make networks, like affordable social groups run out of community centres during weekdays. ‘If you’re starting again you need to have something, because you’ve lost so much already’, she said.

‘Some people [here] make their own little communities.’

The need for affordable social activities was also raised by some women in the Richmond boarding house, while other rooming house residents felt being able to socialise was sometimes a benefit of living in this kind of accommodation. ‘Some people [here] make their own little communities … and get together and have dinner and whatever rather than locking ourselves away in our rooms,’ said David, an older man in a Yarra boarding house. Peter felt it should happen more often, and had a very Australian suggestion of how: ‘[There should be] space outside, where all the people in the house can at least congregate in the one area. Maybe have a barbeque and get that sense of community happening – you know, sit down, cook up some snags, have a beer.’

The happiest people we spoke to were long-term public housing tenants in the Reservoir area. One man in that group said, ‘you can’t get any better
than here.’ What made Reservoir perfect for them was the provision of public transport, shops and health services, but also the sense of security that came from having lived in a place long enough to feel part of a community. An older woman said that a real benefit for her was that her neighbours knew her habits and that ‘if you’re not about’, they would ‘investigate’ to see if she was all right.

‘Education is the only chance she’s got.’

It can’t be overstated how important education was to the people we spoke to. Jenny in Melton put it perfectly: ‘Without an education our generation is a pack of dole-bludgers. I think education’s probably the most important thing for these kids to get a chance in life, because the last thing I want to see my daughter do is pop a kid out at 16 and live what I’ve lived … Education is the only chance she’s got. Take that away from her, she’s got nothing’.

In every group involving parents, access to the right schooling was a huge factor in determining the location of their housing. This was not about a choice between public and private schools – that was not raised once. The important things about schools were that they were accessible, somewhere their children had made friends and in some cases connections with teachers and counsellors, and that they were sympathetic to the needs of low-income parents. Trish in the Aboriginal women’s group said that because they weren’t able to find housing in the same travel zone as her son’s primary school, she often relied on the school for Metcards, which she couldn’t afford but which her son needed.

Others in that group agreed. ‘Absenteeism from school for our kids is a lot to do with the location of housing,’ said another mother.

Kelly, a young Melton mother, was full of praise for her daughter’s school, citing it as her biggest reason for wanting to stay in Melton: ‘She’s picked up [since being there], she’s just thrived. Her school counsellor is teaching her how to interact with other children … And the school is just phenomenal … they have this support system that if we have a camp at the end of the year, they open up accounts for everybody [so] you can start paying [it off] at the beginning of the year. The school makes sure she never misses out. So for her mental health, and my own, I can’t afford to take her out of there.’

‘My daughter, she say “If I change school, I will kill myself”.’

For women who had left violent situations, school was often the only source of stability for their kids. Ellie had recently migrated to Australia when she and her mother left her violent stepfather. On top of everything else, changing schools was hard: ‘I had to go to a new school and I didn’t know the language. It take me like, six months to find a friend. Especially when you’re a teenager, you’re homesick, you want your old school, your old friends, you don’t want anything new coming in your life.’

For kids who had been through trauma, the right school was a lifesaver. Armina, an asylum-seeker on a bridging visa, cried as she talked about her fear of the impact losing their housing would have on her daughter: ‘Changing school, it’s very bad for the kids. Actually they have psychological problem … I reckon everyone have [psychological] problems because we all come here for security. We all have problem from our government, from our country, or from our family, and we can’t find [somewhere] secure, where we are safe … My daughter, she say “If I change school, I will kill myself.”’

‘It’s incredibly disempowering, because you can’t move.’

For people with housing issues, public transport is often key to making a location good or inadequate, services accessible or otherwise, life liveable or a struggle. This is especially true for people with mobility disabilities. Diane, with the disability housing support service, spoke of the irony of living between Lygon and Nicholson Streets in Brunswick, two of the best-serviced tram routes in Melbourne, which she cannot use because the trams are not accessible. She described her particular frustration, shared by others with mobility disabilities, of getting multipurpose taxis, which are not legally required to accept wheelchair bookings: ‘They prefer to go out to the airport. Every government talks about changing it, improving it … no-one’s changed it. The only change they’ve brought in is to cap [the taxi voucher allowance].’
‘You’re outside shops that are closing and you’re there for over an hour in winter, after dark, waiting for a cab,’ said Diane. ‘And you’re in Brunswick, it’s not like you’re in the back of Bourke ... it’s incredibly disempowering, because you can’t move.’

She was clear about the broader implications of this situation: ‘There’s new initiatives coming out within the Department of Human Services looking at building up peoples’ connections with their communities, trying to get them out and about more. But if the infrastructure’s not there, it doesn’t matter how much money you throw at the person. They’re still going to hit barriers.’

The public transport system was one thing that made Richmond a ‘great’ location, according to many women in the Richmond boarding house. The outer East wasn’t good: ‘We lived in Montrose – Montrose is not farther than Lilydale from Ringwood but public transport was non-existent! There’s one bus!’ said Eileen in Wantirna. And Melton felt like a satellite city: most in the Melton group said that what made their housing good for them was proximity to the frequent bus service, but Fiona noted that ‘it’s Melbourne’s transport, it’s not Melton’s, so we’ve got to run by Melbourne’s [timetables].’

‘The last thing I want to see my daughter do is pop a kid out at 16 and live what I’ve lived ... Education is the only chance she’s got. Take that away from her, she’s got nothing.’

‘We’ve got no bus service, no nothing, but because it was cheaper we could afford to move [there].’

Transport infrastructure was critical for people in places like Melton. ‘The further out you get the cheaper the housing is, so that’s where people on a lower income tend to go,’ Angela said. ‘If they’re going to provide cheaper housing away from the city then they need to provide the services along with it, because the people that are going out there are the ones who need the services the most.’

Much discussion in Shepparton centred around the inadequacy of public transport and its implications, especially for young people trying to find work. According to Janet, a worker, it was a dual problem of not enough affordable housing in central locations, and not enough transport to outlying areas: ‘Around Shepparton there’s a lot of outlying towns, and access to housing now is becoming so difficult that people are taking houses outside in the smaller communities where there’s no transport, no services.’

‘If our vehicle breaks down we’re stuffed,’ added John, a resident of one of these communities. ‘We’ve got no bus service, no nothing, but because it was cheaper we could afford to move [there].’

‘Little piece of heaven.’
Kylie, Chris and Dave, three participants in their early twenties, agreed. ‘It’s the same for young people,’ Chris said, ‘like, we go out of Shepparton to get a house, then Social Security’s on our backs: “Why aren’t you getting a job?”’, but it’s a Catch 22. The only place we’re gonna get a place to live is outside Shep. The only place we’re gonna find work is IN Shep!

‘I know people who live in Tatura, which is not far from here’, said Kylie, ‘and there’s one or two buses a day that get you into town and back. [But] the service doesn’t run early enough if you need the bus to travel to work.’

‘The Tatura bus gets into town at 10:30am,’ said Chris. ‘Yeah’, Dave said, ‘who’s going to have a job that starts at 10:30?’ ‘Then you’ve got to knock off at half past two to get the 3 o’clock bus back,’ added Chris.

Phil, another worker, put the problem into a broader perspective: ‘It makes it really hard for kids who can’t live at home. When they’re sixteen and seventeen they haven’t got a licence, so their only other opportunity is, they buy a car, they drive without a licence, next thing they’re busted for driving without a licence and all they’re trying to do is get to work.’

“We’re not just bloody robots that live on oil every day!”

Another issue raised by Shepparton youth workers was cuts to the funding of services like theirs that affected their ability to assist people. ‘In the last four or five years’ said Janet, ‘the services that are available to the community have been forced into a situation where their ability to provide outreach has been taken away from them because of the funding arrangements. There once was the flexibility to go out and see these people, now there’s not.’

Appropriate support and advocacy services were essential for a number of people we spoke to. For certain groups, particularly new migrants, the provision of culturally-appropriate housing support was essential. Rental tenants in the Serbian women’s group said they would not be able to talk to their real estate agent without the bilingual housing worker at the Dandenong Migrant Resource Centre. Radika, a worker in the group, talked about the importance of better on-arrival services: ‘I think from the beginning people are very confused. They come to Australia and they do not know which area is best for them … It’s very important to explain to people about areas, about schools, about childcare, aged care, doctors, then it’s important to explain to them about services which they can use if they don’t speak English. And emergency housing, because it’s very difficult if someone’s [in an] emergency but they have to wait more than two years for a house.’

For some men in the North Melbourne crisis service, consistency of support for people in crisis was the main issue. John had been with his caseworker for three months: ‘That should continue for another 9 months, when they get you into housing because it’s no good handballing you to someone else … At least you got a rapport with that person that you started with. Why keep chopping and changing? This is why people get pissed off!’

‘Yeah, you can’t just handball people,’ agreed Larry. ‘You’re talking about people who have feelings! We’re not just bloody robots that live on oil every day!’

Steve felt that not having consistent, long-term support kept people caught in a spiral: ‘You spend all your time getting better here and then you get stuck somewhere where you just go back down. And then you come back.’

“If we have work permit we can work… we can look after ourselves.”

Participants in both asylum-seeker groups, however, expressed extreme frustration at being reliant on services. ‘They [the Government] are not letting us work,’ Ali said, ‘so they must look after us.’ They did not feel this was right. ‘[I] don’t want to come to [this organisation].’ said Armina. ‘No, they helping too much us [with] everything. Housing, everything.’

While they all said that the assistance they received from community and charitable organisations was excellent, they felt that the money and support should be given to people who were unable to work and earn an income, instead of themselves who were, as Ali said, ‘in the prime of life.’

‘Without the working visa we feel demoralised,’ Elena said. ‘If we have work permit we can work, we can do everything, we can look after ourselves,’ Shalima said, ‘but what happens now, we are like beggars, going from place to place.’
‘If I am asking for money from you, I have to look at your face,’ Mohamed said. ‘And then I have to rely on you, and [that makes you] superior to me.’

It was more than a matter of pride, however. People were scared of being kept in this situation. ‘If you go for three or four years without work, you become lazy,’ said Elena. ‘[Then] if you are offered opportunity to work you can’t because you lose your skills.’ For the past one week I haven’t opened the front door,’ said Shalima. ‘Can’t sleep. Every night, can’t sleep, thinking, “What to do tomorrow?”’

Ali in the men’s group suggested that the Federal Government should allow people in their situation to work even 20 or so hours a week. That way they would still be dissuading people like them from coming to Australia for economic reasons, and they wouldn’t be able to send money home to their families, but they would at least be able to ‘do something, to earn at least money for survival, [to] spend on housing and children. [And we could] be part of the community.’

‘Once you’ve got direction, everything’s beautiful now.’

Peoples’ dignity was compromised when they felt their rights were being violated. As Mark in Footscray put it, ‘I’ve got rights, but because I’m living on the street, I don’t have the rights. [The attitude is] ‘We give you what you deserve’, and you just [have to] sit there and take it. Which is probably what got us in the first place into this situation.’

Advocacy services are important to inform people of their rights and assist them to exercise them. One of the Shepparton participants described her landlord’s behaviour and asked if I thought it was legal. When I suggested she ring the local tenancy advice line, I was told it had been closed down.

Apart from highlighting the need for such services where they aren’t sufficient, people testified time and again to the benefit of the services that do exist, with comments like: ‘If it wasn’t for [worker] or [agency] I don’t know what I would have done, I would have been on the streets.’ Many people who find they need housing assistance simply do not know where to start.

Angela in Melton was in this situation when her family broke down. What she needed, she said, was just support to navigate an unknown system: ‘You can fix your own problems, slowly, build back up again to where you once were. I just wanted someone to listen and direct me, to say “All right, go here Angela”. Once you’ve got that . . . everything’s beautiful now.’

‘Don’t demean us by your attitude. Don’t take us down further than we already are.’

Good workers could make a real difference, as some Melton participants said when talking about their workers. ‘If you’ve got a good [housing] officer it helps, but if they don’t really know [what you’re going through] that doesn’t make it good either. I’ve got it good that way,’ Kelly, a young woman, said. Her friend Michelle agreed: ‘Yeah, they’re good here, for that reason.’

Bad service delivery, however, makes a difficult situation worse. In a number of groups, people spoke about problems with Office of Housing workers. This was a major point of the discussion in the Footscray housing support service group. According to Brian in that group, for Office of Housing staff, ‘It’s an office job. People don’t really have the compassion to deal with us.’

For Mark, the lack of compassion came from a lack of understanding and empathy: ‘They’ve got the education, the people who actually work in housing . . . You’re genuine: you want a house, you want a place, you want a roof, they can’t help you; but they look at you as if you’re downtrodden, and they have got . . . everything at their fingertips, and they’ve got you by the balls. Because if you . . . don’t scrub up well, don’t present well, they don’t want to know you, and they’ll turn around and really take it out on you. They need to be educated, because there’s a lot of us, now, below the breadline.’

Participants in groups who raised these issues suggested mandatory training for Office of Housing staff in things like cross-cultural awareness, understanding, empathy, and basic politeness. Roger, an advocate in Reservoir, said of the OoH staff he dealt with, ‘They are supposedly trained in customer service, but they are the rudest mob that you could ever come across in your life.’ When I asked Donna in Footscray, one of the most passionate speakers on the issue of respect, what she would say to the Office of Housing if she could, she did not
hesitate: ‘Treat us like humans. We’re not animals. Don’t demean us by your attitude. Don’t take us down further than we already are.’

‘The system is meant to look after us as a whole society. That’s what we all worked so hard for.’

This issue raised some very powerful responses. It was clearly defined as human right not to have your dignity and self-respect compromised in the process of accessing something as fundamental as housing. One of the most powerful statements about this was made by a worker. Melinda sat in on the focus group she had organised with permission of her service users at an aged care housing program in the outer East. A number of participants in that group had once owned their own homes but lost them through misfortune, mostly due to ill health in later life. It was a very emotional, and cathartic, discussion.

‘I sometimes find it very difficult that I’ve been doing what I’ve been doing for 20 years . . . [and] I’m paid by the Government to basically work like a dog on absolutely nothing to grant you access to what's your human right,’ she said. ‘What upsets me even more as a worker, and what keeps me going in this job, is the fact that all of you have shared your journey until you met me, and that journey has been an incredible journey. You actually got to the bottom, you were so desperate, you ran out of resources, you were pending homelessness, and it makes me angry because the system is meant to look after us as a whole society. That’s what we all worked so hard for . . . And it makes me very sad that you’ve gone through so much pain when you ought not [to], because your human rights were not respected by the system.’

‘I think cultural adequacy means that every person is respected and feels valued and is safe in their accommodation.’

Asking people about cultural appropriateness raised some very interesting responses. More than any other question, the responses varied according to the cultural backgrounds of participants. To some people, it meant that everybody should have their rights to, and within, housing respected. ‘I think culturally adequate means . . . every person is respected and feels valued and is safe in their accommodation,’ said Kristy in the Richmond women’s boarding house.

‘If you’re out on the street,’ said Mark in Footscray, ‘and there’s Chinese, African [people], whatever the case may be . . . I don’t mind who I live with as long as I’ve got a roof over my head.’
matter. They want a house, we want a house . . . I don’t mind who I live with as long as I’ve got a roof over my head.’

Other responses were common to people of all cultures, such as the need for safety, and to be close to schools. This came up in every group that included parents, regardless of background. Another thing was privacy, which everybody said meant that each person – especially teenagers – must have their own bedroom. For the women in the Arabic-speaking group, privacy also meant fences and window shutters, so you could not see into your neighbours’ houses, and vice versa. One woman said that because her house was directly on the street, she could see ‘sex in front of her garden’ when the woman next door brought men home, and that this is ‘not appropriate in our culture’.

Other issues depended on people’s culture. The Aboriginal women’s group said that the size of housing, and the number of bedrooms, was an issue because of cultural obligations that often meant they had extended family staying. Some also felt strongly that houses ‘should stay in the family’: ‘If you’re with your uncles or aunties and if they pass away, you’ve got to leave that premises,’ said Deb. ‘That’s within Aboriginal Housing Board [properties] as well as public housing.’

That group agreed unanimously that for their housing to be adequate, their rights must be acknowledged in a Bill of Rights. This meant their rights to land and water, as well as recognition ‘that we are First Nation people’. As Rachel said, ‘The Government’s signed off on their human rights conventions but at the same time they don’t acknowledge us as a people. How are you going to get an Indigenous issue or perspective across when they don’t recognise us as a nation of people?’

Other responses to this question illustrated some things people value most about the “Australian” way of life including: a front or back garden, space to have friends over ‘for a drink or a barbie’, ‘our little block’, the Hills Hoist, being able to have a pet (‘You should be able to put your pet as part of your family on your application for transitional housing!’), a decent shed and a carport, good neighbours, and ‘the local footy club’. Maggie in the Richmond boarding house raised another thing: ‘And of course you need a smoking room for us smokers. Now that’s a human right!’

‘We had community gardens, and everybody sort of chips in.’

In answering this question a number of people spoke about the need for community services, not just for people of particular cultures, but for people of all cultures. Participants in the Reservoir group said there should be a community centre and a health centre in every housing estate area. People also talked about activities they had been involved in that had brought people together. Barb in the Reservoir group served in the school canteen when her kids were in school: ‘We had diversified cultures, and that brought them all together.’

‘If you have all the different nationalities [and] they could all congregate together, you’ll find that people will mix better,’ said Shirley. ‘Where I live in North Melbourne, you’ve got a pretty big variety there no matter where you look . . . because we all went to the same sorts of groups, we all mixed well and it all got evened out. It does work. And then we had community gardens, and everybody sort of chips in.’

‘I grew up in Shepparton,’ said William. ‘When they started putting the housing commission in then, we had all races around us. We had Aboriginals over the back fence, Asian people beside us . . . and because we went to school with these guys, it all integrated eventually. I didn’t have a problem at all.’

These were some of the more positive responses to this question. However, in every group except the culturally-specific ones, asking this question also raised comments about people from other countries who some participants felt were getting ‘a better deal’ accessing housing than they were. These views were clearly influenced by the media, with many people who expressed them citing as “evidence” something they had read in a Melbourne tabloid newspaper.
three affordable and secure

‘People, regardless of where they come from, have the right to affordable housing. It’s a basic human right.’
I’d really love to give everybody in Centrelink $200 and say ‘you live on that’!

Housing stress is both a cause, and a result, of poverty. More than any other question, asking about housing affordability illustrates what it is like trying to survive in Victoria for people on low incomes. It is something that a number of people felt that the rest of the community, particularly the Government, don’t understand.

Tara in Bendigo said: ‘The pollies who are on hundreds of thousands of dollars just seem to have this idea that it’s like in their Uni days [when] they may have had to struggle, have a few crates and a plank for a book case. That’s their idea of people who don’t have money – you know, you can always get by. So it needs to be very strongly indicated that [what is] affordable is subject to personal income, because I think that one of the problems [is that] you have this idea that you start from “up here” [indicating a point above her head].’

When people were asked what they thought would change the situation, they said time and time again that politicians should come down ‘to their level’ and see what it was like for them trying to survive – ‘Then you’d really get change!’

‘I’m sure if you had half the parliamentarians, each one looking after a disabled person for a month, things would change quite fast!’ ‘Bring [the politicians] down to our level and see if they can survive and support their families on $275 a week.’ ‘John Howard should have to live in a house like normal people like us have to live in. Then his opinions would change about people who are actually getting really upset.’ ‘I’d really love to give everybody in Centrelink $200 and say “you live on that”!’

A quarter of your income is an awful slice out of the cake, especially [when] some of us have special needs.

There was a shared definition across the groups of what affordability means. It’s being able to pay rent, bills and essential living expenses for themselves and their families, and having enough left over for emergencies and for things like after-school activities for the kids, a trip to the cinema or the swimming pool for themselves; things that make you ‘feel human’.

Many measured the affordability of rent as a proportion of their income, and it was stated in every group that the ‘absolute maximum’ anyone should pay in rent is 25 percent of their income. For some this is even too much. ‘I think 25 percent of your pension is excessive,’ said Eileen in Wantirna. ‘I wouldn’t mind 20 percent, but a quarter of your income is an awful slice out of the cake, especially [when] some of us have special needs.’
Some older residents lamented the rent increase in public housing. ‘23 percent it used to be, and it should never have gone up any higher,’ said Roger in Reservoir. ‘That extra two percent has nearly killed a lot of people. Doesn’t sound like much, but it’s a lot.’

A number of people, however, felt that the Office of Housing practice of taking rent as a proportion of residents’ income wasn’t fair, as the rent increased every time their pension or salary increased, making it impossible to ‘get ahead’. ‘In Sydney, the Ministry [of housing] only put their rent up once a year,’ said Donna in Footscray. ‘Here, as soon as you get a rise [in the pension] it goes up automatically, and I think that’s wrong.’

A couple of groups raised the issue of rent being charged ‘per head’ in these properties. A single mother in the Arabic group with two working sons said they paid $660 per week for their Office of Housing property: $220 per week each. Many of the Aboriginal women who, due to cultural and family obligations, often had a number of relatives staying with them at any one time, said this could make public housing unaffordable. ‘You will just [have to] breathe air and eat air, because you can’t afford it any more.’

Other people described housing affordability in relation to their other expenses. ‘It [the cost of renting] has got to be flat across the board,’ said Robert in the Wantirna group. ‘Not 30% of your wage or my wage, because everybody’s still got to pay their rent, their phone bill, all their other bills, and they should still have enough money in their hand to enjoy themselves.’

The Arabic women’s group agreed that about $150 per week was a reasonable amount to pay in rent, given the other costs of living. Nazreen, who said she was paying $802 [per month] for a unit for herself and two kids, said ‘If I’m paying the whole money, the whole salary to the gas, to the rent, what I eat? You will just [have to] breathe air and eat air, because you can’t afford it any more.’

A number of people calculated the cost of their housing as their rent plus their utility costs because, as Peter in Reservoir said, ‘You come back from paying your bills on payday and you haven’t got that $170 [after rent].’

Many had trouble paying their gas and electricity bills. Some had tried to negotiate with the utility providers, like Martin in Bendigo: ‘If you ring up the electricity company and say, “Can I please go on a payment plan?”’, they say you have to pay $50 this week and $50 next week. You say “I can’t afford that, can I pay $20?” and they bully you into paying $50 and you can’t pay it, so it gets cut off.’

A couple of people in Yallourn North were on an “easyway” plan. They paid $25 a fortnight from their social security benefit towards their electricity bill, which was helpful but not ideal because, as Barry pointed out, ‘they [the electricity retailers] are getting the interest on your money.’

Some people with disabilities raised specific problems with their energy bills. One woman in the Reservoir group said she needed to recharge her electric wheelchair overnight, every night. This meant she had huge electricity bills, but she wasn’t eligible for a rebate because her wheelchair isn’t considered ‘life-saving equipment’. Another woman with multiple sclerosis said that, for her, air-conditioning is a ‘medical need’: ‘if it goes over 20 degrees I can’t function’ – and while there is an MS concession on electricity bills, it’s only about 17 percent ‘and 10 percent of that is GST’.

‘It makes me feel less than human.’

When asked what affordability meant to them, some people went into great detail about the impact the cost of their housing had on their lives. The Wantirna group of aged care housing recipients was one such group. Gregory said: ‘The pensioners who rely on a fixed income, there’s enough to live on week to week, but . . . what happens when your coat falls off your back and you need a new coat? Or your teeth go bad and you need to go to the bloody dentist at $88 a filling? There is no money for those extras, and [they] are not super-luxuries – 90 percent of the time they are essential things.’

Molly was paying around $800 a month in rent. She said that by the time she had paid that out of her pension as well as her other bills and expenses, and looked at what she had left and what she couldn’t do with it, like go to a friend’s wedding because she couldn’t afford a dress or a present:

little piece of heaven.
‘I don’t know about anybody else, but [it makes me] feel less than human’.

Pat described the pressure of being her husband’s carer, and what happens when there’s an emergency with her daughter, who has schizophrenia. ‘Now there’s no money for her, so I am now – out of my and my husband’s pension – going to look after her, and my husband, and feed them. Now I haven’t got enough this week to pay all the rent. So what am I going to do? For the next seven days I’m going to bite my nails and I’m going to … pull out me hair because I’ve got to make that phone call [to the landlord] … By the time I make that call I’ve made myself a nervous wreck, I am now ill, and that phone call says “I’m sorry, I’ve got into a bit of a situation”, and the owner is going to put me through the third degree and make me feel like ABSOLUTELY NOTHING.’

‘This is what [it does to you],’ said Molly, ‘the pressure of trying to survive, paying the rents you can afford to pay, and just trying to be a human being.’

There was a feeling expressed by older people that at their age, they shouldn’t still be having to struggle, at least with affording their housing. According to Iris from the aged housing action group, ‘When you get to a certain age – say, 65 or 70 – you should have a right to cheaper housing. I mean, these days you get to 40 and you can’t find work, so what hope have you got if you’re 65?’

For older people with a disability, cheaper housing would only be part of the solution. Amber, a worker with an aged housing program, said she had a couple of service users who ‘actually are relatively well-looked after financially and have money that they could purchase a home with. But then how do they maintain the level of care that they need within that home? Certainly paying for 24 support is not affordable.’

‘This situation, it is sending people the way of marginality.’

Another group struggling to make ends meet were single mothers, particularly those who had gone through the expense and dislocation of moving because of domestic violence. Fiona, a Melton women in her early thirties living in transitional housing, explained: ‘You’re going through all this, all of us as parents, trying to cope mentally with whatever’s going on, trying not to worry the kids, but then we’re stopping them from doing [things], like you can’t afford their football anymore … So they are the ones that are suffering because that’s where the cuts are, for them … and that’s where we belt ourselves up because they’re upset with us – “Oh, we never get to do anything!”’ – so that’s another pressure.’

Angela’s problems were slightly different: ‘I’m anorexic, and I’m in the process of getting help, but I feed my kids and go without. I’ll send my kids on excursions and go without. It does worry me, but that’s half my problem.’
Jenny coped by doing cash-in-hand work she didn’t declare, because she said she couldn’t afford to: ‘25 percent [of income in rent] is a little bit too much, from what Centrelink pays. With bills and kids and cars and whatever else, there’s no way, absolutely no way in hell, I could live on that [$227] if I didn’t work.’

Participants in another group said their situations left them with little choice than to break the law. Some single men in the asylum-seekers group without the right to work or social security said they considered doing cash-in-hand work, but worried about raids by the immigration department. Ali felt the pressures of not having an income were worse on parents: ‘It is very hard for the people with kids. Being father and mother, they want to look after their kids. They will do something, you know. Sometimes you don’t care. If you [have to] steal, you go and steal.’ He said lack of other options was forcing people to be criminals. ‘This situation, it is sending people the way of marginality.’

‘I gave up my job because I couldn’t afford it.’

Most people we spoke to said they were receiving social security benefits. Some were working, but in insecure jobs, and this defined their housing options. Julie, a Richmond women’s boarding house resident in her late forties, joked about her limited choices: ‘I don’t feel I’ve got any security of employment. I could see myself having to live here . . . If I can’t afford the private marketplace, well, my only [other] alternative is some sort of public housing, or being a bag lady. And I feel the cold too much, I just can’t do that!’

Others spoke of being limited by the ‘poverty trap’, being unable to afford to work and rent because of the way rents in public housing are calculated. Trish in the Thornbury Indigenous women’s group commented, ‘On one hand you’ve got these welfare reforms that say we’ve got to get women back to work, but on the other hand you’re penalising them when they do get work, even if it’s part time work. It’s not worth them working.’

Libby, living in public housing, had experienced this irony first-hand: ‘I got a job at Forges. I worked there for six months. They [the Office of Housing] put my rent up to nearly $300 per week, and then paying my gas, electricity and water, I had $10 to my name every week. So I gave up my job because I couldn’t afford it . . . It was the wages and everything I’m spewing I had to give up, but . . . it was either lose my kids because I couldn’t afford to dress them and feed them, lose the house because I couldn’t afford to pay for it, or lose my job. So I chose to give up the job.’

Deb, in the same group, agreed. ‘I mean, what mum goes back to work, gets her first pay – you think you’re going to part with it and give it to Ministry of Housing when our kids needs shoes and clothes?’

‘People, regardless of where they come from, have the right to affordable housing. Regardless of their background. It’s a basic human right.’

The rising cost of private rental was raised by almost everybody. People spoke of areas that used to be affordable and no longer were, particularly in the West, such as Footscray and St Albans. They described having to move to outlying suburbs where housing was affordable but jobs, services and transport were limited, or nonexistent. Or renting in inner areas to be close to work or school, but having to compromise other basic needs to pay their rent. Johannes, an international student, lived just outside Footscray and pays over 55 percent of his income in rent. ‘I don’t have enough money for food,’ he said.

The problem was not restricted to metropolitan areas. Participants in Bendigo raised the same issues. ‘It’s 25 percent of your income in public housing but it’s 55 percent of your income in private rental. It’s ludicrous,’ said Cathy.

‘I’ve got six kids and I’m on a pension and there is nowhere I can go that is going to be below $250 a week! It shouldn’t be allowed to get that high!’ said Belinda in Bendigo. She thought that low-cost rental housing would benefit landlords too because ‘it’d be more secure for them, that [tenants] weren’t going to skip out on the rent.’

Carmel was paying $170 per week in Castlemaine. For her as a student, this was not affordable: ‘It just means that everything I do is restricted because of the incredible cost of living, of paying your rent.’

A number of single people felt that sharing with another person was the only way they could rent, but that they shouldn’t be forced to do so. Once
again, it came down to being able to choose your living environment being a right. ‘That’s just wrong, to impose upon somebody’s personal lifestyle where they have to bring in a stranger,’ said Tara in Bendigo. ‘I mean, talk about safety – you could be inviting in an axe-murderer!’

‘If public housing is not an option, then let’s make what’s out there better resourced.’

There were many suggestions from participants about how rental affordability could be achieved. Many people said that the Government should limit rents in private rental to an affordable level, and regulate how much they could be increased. Rosa in Footscray thought rent should be calculated on the standard of the property, which could be done as part of the broader process of setting standards for the sector: ‘Maybe somebody [should have to] go in, when somebody’s going to rent [out] a house, to ascertain as to whether the property is rentable and liveable. They would then be able to say “OK, you can rent your house between this price range because this is all your house is worth.”’

Cathy in Bendigo thought local councils should play a role: ‘In their planning projections into the future [they could] put aside areas . . . where young people can buy or rent in or people who are coming out of certain crisis situations can then afford to rent in a particular area.’ Robert in Wantirna thought there should be some kind of regulation of multiple investors: ‘I think the Government should say you can have one house, maybe two houses for investment, and [that second house] should be priced at what you should be allowed to rent that house at.’

Others thought the Government should subsidise private rental more, and that the current level of rent assistance is nowhere near enough. People thought that for private rental to be affordable, it would need to be subsidised to the same extent as rents in public housing. ‘I live in private rental because the Government wouldn’t give me public housing, so why shouldn’t the regulations that govern Government housing apply to private housing?’ asked Rose in the aged housing action group. ‘The Federal Government pays a certain amount towards the rent [in public housing], so why can’t the same regulations apply?’

Jo in Melton had the same idea. She thought there should be a two-year Government subsidy for people leaving transitional housing, to help them get into private rental: ‘If public housing is not an option, then let’s make what’s out there better resourced.’

There were similar suggestions from some participants in one of the Footscray groups. ‘I think a good thing would be . . . if women like ourselves could get into private housing but the Government would pay so much, and we would be paying only what we would pay in housing commission,’ said Sarah.

‘Yeah, if they haven’t got enough housing commission then why not let us look at private [rental] and then pay the difference?’ asked Rosa. ‘You [would] pay the equivalent of what someone in public housing is paying where you maintain your property in private rental,’ agreed Kim.

Yet people identified housing affordability as only part of the bigger problem of growing inequality in Australia. ‘I think if the price of housing – everything from nails to timber – is all going up, wages should go up and pensions should go up accordingly,’ said Robert in Wantirna. ‘The government should say, “OK, we’re going to put a ban or a stop on the renting prices” . . . You’ve got to make it reasonable and affordable for everybody.’ He, and others in this group, felt that the growing poverty gap means that at the moment, nothing is ‘reasonable and affordable’ for everybody. ‘There seems to be no middleman,’ said Pat. ‘Either you’re rich or you’re poor’.

‘You need to know day to day, week to week, month to month, where you’re living.’

For many people, security of housing was closely linked with affordability. This linking of the two issues clearly shows why there is such demand for public housing in Victoria. Public housing is seen by many who cannot afford home ownership as the only form of housing that offers affordability and long-term stability. Cathy from Bendigo explained why: ‘I’m in public housing and I’m very grateful for it. I feel very safe there, I know I can’t get thrown out . . . I’d been paying private rental and it makes a real difference, [paying] rent based on your income. I feel really sorry for people that have to rent
privately these days... Now it seems like if you don’t own your own house it’s your own fault, and yet it’s more and more difficult for people to buy a house.

Long-term stability was a driving force behind the creation of public housing, according to one participant in the aged housing action group: ‘If you go back to the 1950s when they started building the Government housing, that was the only time that people would tell you they felt safe. People were getting evicted through the 1930s one after the other, and [public housing] was the most wonderful thing that ever happened to those people.’

Many felt that housing should be for life. Val in Reservoir, who said she had been moving around with young children for years, was ‘really rapt’ when she got public housing: ‘That’s the thing with housing commission, you get that permanence. You know that if you’re renting you can be put out any time, but [in OoH] if you’re a good payer you can stay in that house... for the rest of your life, more or less.’

Some people, however, had a problem with the perception that public housing was permanent, and questioned whether some people ‘should be allowed to stay there’ if their income went above a certain level, or their situation changed, for example if someone was in a three bedroom house, and their kids had grown up and moved out. This was contentious in a couple of groups.

On the whole, however, people were very clear about the emotional, psychological and financial impacts of housing instability on themselves, and their families. ‘I’ve been hospitalised twice as a direct result of being made homeless,’ said Kristy, a young woman in the Richmond boarding house. ‘You need to know day to day, week to week, month to month... where you’re living,’ said Belinda in Bendigo. ‘It’s completely necessary for your mental state, your emotional state.’

Bec, another young Richmond woman, explained why it was important that the Government ensure people have secure housing: ‘Adequate housing is absolutely fundamental for your health and also for your employment prospects. If your accommodation is uncertain, you’re not in the position to be able to hold down a job or follow through with a course of study... there’s just such a relationship between stability in where you live and your sense of being secure and to be able to live your life without threat of eviction... There’s definitely a vested interest for the Government in ensuring that low-income people do have access to housing, and that we’re not just left to be catered for by charities, however well-meaning they may be!’

‘A house, it could mean stability. And that’s what you build your foundations on.’

For people in crisis and transitional housing, housing insecurity was a major issue. Many residents of properties managed by a women’s transitional housing service had children and had left their homes due to domestic violence. They
expressed their relief at having found housing, but they wanted it to be secure, even though they realised crisis housing was intended to be just that. ‘As soon as you sign your paperwork [for the property], you’re already worrying where you’re going to go in three months time!’ said Claire.

‘It’s like, three months then you’re out,’ said Jennifer. ‘The Office of Housing is like, it could be six months, it could be a year, it could be two years. Your children are always looking to you [asking] “Mum, what’s happening?”’

Security of tenure was a recurring issue for people in caravan parks, a number of whom had issues related to their lack of rights. Caravan park residents in Shepparton told of being evicted before school holidays, as owners could charge higher rents during those periods to travellers. According to one worker, ‘Around this area, a lot of the caravan parks won’t offer a long-term lease, because their tenants then have rights’.

For a number of the Richmond women’s boarding house residents, few other places could offer the option of long-term security for older women on low incomes. Dorothy said: ‘I think that [in] a place like this, you should be allowed to stay here until you’re too old to look after yourself.’

Maggie said: ‘The fact that [the manager] told me I could stay here as long as I liked, I was just totally bewildered, I mean I was amazed. Nobody had said to me I could stay anywhere permanently.’

For others, rooming houses were anything but permanent. Ben in North Melbourne said: ‘A house, it could mean stability. That’s what you build your foundations on.’

‘You need to have some kind of standard across the board ... Not that Joe Blow reckons you’re a nice bloke and you can stay,’ said Mark in Footscray. ‘Not that Joe Blow reckons you’re a nice bloke and you can stay, it’s got to be impersonal, it’s got to be on a principle basis.’

Eviction for non-payment of rent was another fear commonly expressed by rooming and boarding house residents, one directly linked to what many described as the rising costs of rent in such places. This was particularly an issue for those living in rooming houses around the inner north and south of Melbourne, areas which have seen significant gentrification.

‘I feel like at the moment the rent’s going up every second week,’ said Julie in Richmond. ‘Maybe it could be delayed a bit – I’d like to see it go up every four years instead of every year, because you feel like you’re just chasing your tail.’

‘There should be a cap on rooming house rents ... some of those private rooming houses have just skyrocketed’, said John, in the rooming house advocacy service users group.

Anna, a young woman in a Yarra rooming house, felt that this defeated the purpose of rooming houses: ‘The problem I have with [community rooming house organisations] wishing to raise rents to the private rental market [rates] is that it misses the whole point of addressing homelessness. People who live in rooming houses, they’re defined as “tertiary homeless”. They’re tertiary homeless simply because they can’t afford to live in private rental.’

Some residents faced eviction because they tried to stand up for their rights. Ella, an older Chinese woman in a private boarding house, said: ‘Last November, my landlord want to raise the rent. I say “You can’t do that” and I went to the [tenants union] ... I show them the letter he wrote to me and they were angry. He say “You need to move out, we don’t want you living here anymore ... If you still living here you will never feel safety. If you have any clothes, they will disappear,” and that night, I am so scared, I don’t know what will happen.’

A number of boarding house residents reported being constantly ‘targeted’, threatened with eviction by landlords who knew they had few other choices. The arbitrary nature of security in boarding houses was clearly felt to be unfair. ‘You need to have some kind of standard across the board,’ said Mark in Footscray. ‘Not that Joe Blow reckons you’re a nice bloke and you can stay, it’s got to be impersonal, it’s got to be on a principle basis.’
'To be something my kids can be proud of.'

Fears of eviction were echoed across the board from people in private rental. Security of tenure was often linked to affordability. Many people feared — and some had experienced — eviction because they weren’t able to pay rent. Chantelle, a young mother and full-time student in Bendigo, had a story that was fairly ‘typical’: ‘I managed to get [private rental] when I was with my partner, via his mum. She had a good job and everything so she was able to get us a house. But when he left, and left all the bills, it was a struggle to pay it all off, so I was evicted for not paying my rent.’

‘If you have security of tenure they can’t put you out, unless you get up to mischief,’ said Roger in Reservoir. ‘It should be [that] everybody has security of tenure, if you’re a good tenant. If you’re a bad tenant, stiff bikkies.’

But even being a ‘good tenant’ was not felt to be enough to ensure stability. There was a strong perception across the groups that, as Barb in Reservoir said, ‘if you’re renting, you can be put out at any time.’ People felt security in private rental depended on the whim of their landlords. Many said that they avoided asking for essential repairs to be done for fear this would attract a rent increase, or that they may be evicted for being ‘troublesome’ tenants, which would affect their chances of gaining rental in the future. Kylie in Shepparton said: ‘It’s just so hard to find a house these days, and then they [the landlord] says to you, ‘If you don’t like it here, you find somewhere else.’

According to a youth worker in that group, this is an issue of tenants’ rights: ‘In the private rental market landlords often don’t like leases to be signed because they think it gets them out of [responsibility]. A lot of renters don’t get a copy of the rental guide, to know your rights and responsibilities … [They think] “I don’t think I’ve got any rights so I have to move because they say so,” and then the landlords can rip them off for whatever they can.’

Older tenants who had been renting for longer still worried about the risk of losing their home because the owner wanted them out, even for legitimate reasons, like needing the house for family members. One suggested that, ‘There should be a time set, whether it’s [after] five or seven years, where if the landlord wants his property for some reason, he should be compelled to find you similar accommodation,’ to which another replied ‘But they won’t even write you a lease for five years!’

When asked what would make them feel secure in their housing, participants in Melton said it was about being able to stay for the period of time that was right for them. ‘If you’ve got that place that you can call home for as much time as you need, to build up as much money as you need,’ said Jo, ‘until you can say “OK, I can leave here now and move into the house that I’m paying off”, and feel good within yourself, instead of saying “OK we’ve got to move out in nine months’ time”, and then it all starts and you go back to the beginning again.’

For Angela, it was about ‘being given a choice’: ‘I like where I am and I’d be happy to stay there at the present time. My five-year plan is, I want to own my own home. Where I am at the moment, I’d prefer to stay there because that’d help me to get the deposit, it’s cheap enough … to help me get into my own home. To give myself a better life … To be something my kids can be proud of.’

‘Your own little piece of heaven.’

For many people, the Great Australian Dream still exists. Middle-aged people who had been renting for a long time, especially, felt that true stability could only come from owning your home. As Debbie in Shepparton said, ‘My dream would be that we would all be given our own home and you would pay whatever you could afford to pay, and then you’re going to look after that because eventually you will own it, which would get rid of a lot of [that] vandalism … And we’d all end up owning our own dream. And you’re not going to hurt it, because it’s your own little piece of heaven.’

Robert in Wantirna said: ‘What we’re all asking is that we just want that comfort zone. Our little piece of space is worth millions to us. Like the Packers and the Foxes, their place is worth millions – it IS millions! But what we have is precious because it’s ours.’
Women in the Serbian group even said that they considered themselves homeless because they were renting their houses. Radika, the interpreter, explained: ‘In our culture we didn’t move very often. One time, we built our house and stay all our life in one house. Very emotionally connected to our house and our family … We lost everything during the war and became homeless. Now [we] consider if we have to rent a house we are homeless again because it’s not our house … [but] we cannot buy a house because it is too expensive.’

‘It’s very hard for me, to see what I had, and what I have now.’

Ownership, however, did not always mean happily-ever-after. Some of the most emotional stories came from people in Wantirna who had owned their homes and, through misfortune due to illness, lost it in later life. These people’s experiences spoke of the fundamental importance of housing. Eileen, now living in public housing, told her story:

‘I had a house – we had a house. When my husband got ill I was still working and paying, looking after him … I was lucky in that, when the bank repossessed our house, we lost our house, that my eldest son … took us in. Otherwise we’d have been out on the street. And the losing of that house was … 40 percent my fault, 60 percent the bank, because the bank changed [ownership] … and they took an awful lot of money off me’. She started to cry. ‘And then the house was sold, for $128,000 … They charged us $9000, for solicitors … The person who bought it resold it six months later and got $240,000 for it. Now I feel I was robbed.’

‘The bank put me out on the street,’ said another participant, Celia. ‘If it hadn’t been for a very kind nun who I knew at the time who knew of an organisation who would pay a bond for a little place for me to go into … I would’ve been just on the street. I went into this beautiful home, this tiny little unit … well, I can’t explain the feeling. But I was eating a roll for my dinner, I went down to about six stone three, because I couldn’t afford to eat … Centrelink wouldn’t give me an allowance unless I did a skill share course, and at the age of 57 they sent me off to school … I found that very difficult, because then they’d send me for jobs … Centrelink was forcing me to go to these interviews, because if I didn’t go to two interviews a fortnight, I didn’t get any pension. And I was feeling demoralised, because I was being [asked] all the time, “At your age, why do you need to work?”’

Robert said, ‘I had a mental breakdown in 1990. I owned the house outright. I didn’t pay anything on it. I was a really hard worker, I was a bricklayer. I was 58 then. I’m 68 now. I rely on the pension. It’s very hard for me, to see what I had, and what I have now …’

‘When the bank repossessed our house, my eldest son took us in. And then the house was sold, for $128,000 … The person who bought it resold it six months later and got $240,000 for it. Now I feel I was robbed.’
There is a very big stigma about mental illness... If it hadn’t been for [the workers at this organisation], I don’t know where I’d be. I finally got a commission place, about five weeks ago. And I thank you very much.’

Perhaps some of these experiences could not have been prevented. But a number of people said that if they had been able to get ‘rent assistance for their mortgage’ – that is, mortgage relief – they would not have lost their homes. They felt it didn’t make sense that there was no such thing.

Doug in Shepparton said, ‘We owned our house. We had to sell the house when my business went down, and then we couldn’t afford a mortgage. And I went to Centrelink and I said, can I get rent assistance? And they said no, because you’re buying a house, you can’t get assistance. Now I would not have had to move out of that house and sell it if I’d have got rent assistance, and we wouldn’t have had to access these other services we have to now if we could’ve stayed in the house. And it was cheaper paying the mortgage than the rent we’re paying now.’

‘At least we’d be putting our money to a home that we’re going to own.’

People had many ideas for how both the Federal and State Governments could better help people into home ownership, as otherwise it is not considered achievable for many people on low incomes. Rosa in Footscray said: ‘I’ve just gone and seen someone about buying a home, and they will only give you four times your income ... I’m lucky that with my child support I’m on a decent income on paper, but what am I going to buy for $150,000 with four children?’

The major problem is, as house and land and unit values are going up, doubling every five years ... pensions are not going up in proportion,’ said Robert in Wantirna. ‘And I can’t see any way in which that problem is solved [except to look at] how the country’s running.’

Government assistance is particularly necessary for disadvantaged communities. ‘The “Australian Dream” of owning your own home is just not reachable in our community,’ said Rachel in the Aboriginal women’s group. ‘I think more opportunities – more incentives – should be made available for Aboriginal families to own their homes.’ There was particular concern in this group about what would happen to Aboriginal families who had home loans through ATSIC, now that ATSIC is being abolished.

Some thought the Federal Government’s first homeowners’ grant was a good idea, but that could be done better. ‘They need to reorganise that somehow,’ thought Cathy in Bendigo. ‘If they think [of] housing commission houses and the home buyers grant, maybe mix it up somehow and actually build someone like me a house ... instead of saying, you’ve got to go and find a property [and then] here’s $7,500.’ ‘You’ve got to buy it first so you’re already behind the eight-ball’, agreed Emma.

People made comparisons between what was happening in other countries, like the ‘build-your-own-house’ project in America, and in other States. ‘In Tasmania they have a program where low income earners can buy ex-public housing houses, it’s called “Streets Ahead”,’ said Kim in Footscray. ‘For three months they’re advertised and they’re only available to those people, so investors don’t buy them all up and rent them all out. [The Government] pays all your taxes, your fees, you get the free soil testing and the report on the house ... It enables people to get out of the rental market and it means that it’s not going to be more expensive to buy than it is to rent, and I was surprised that they didn’t have that here [in Victoria].’

People in many groups thought there should be a way of being able to put down your rent as a deposit towards your own home. ‘People on the pension should be able to buy a home and the mortgage be the same amount as what they’re paying in rental money,’ said Rosa in Footscray. ‘At least [we’d be] putting our money to a home that we’re going to own.’

Many people thought it was still possible to buy your Office of Housing property after having lived in it for a number of years; others thought that it wasn’t but it should be. The suggestion of an Office of Housing “rent, try, buy” scheme came up many times. However, it was emphasised that if this was to happen, the Office of Housing must keep ‘topping up’ their properties so there would still be enough for people to live in as public rental housing.
four recommendations.
These recommendations detail what needs to be changed for the right to adequate housing to be realised for Victorians. They are heavily influenced by the thoughts of those who participated in the Project focus groups and include quotes from participants. They reflect the interconnectedness of housing rights and other human rights, and the breadth of the legislative and policy provisions covering various aspects of the right to adequate housing in Victoria.

They are directed towards both the Federal and the Victorian Governments. The Federal Government is bound by international law to ensure that the right to adequate housing is ‘respected, protected and fulfilled’ in Australia. The Victorian Government has an obligation to realise the right to adequate housing in those areas for which it has assumed responsibility, including housing supply, homelessness services, tenancy law and other legislative protections.
Housing and homelessness.

‘Is this Charter of Rights going to be incorporated into an Australian Constitution so that that right is going to be there no matter who’s in government?’

1 The human right to adequate housing should be recognised in law by both the Federal and Victorian Governments.
   - This could be achieved either by legislation – such as a Commonwealth Human Rights Act that protects human rights – or by a Constitutional Bill of Rights. Such legislative protection should include all rights covered under international human rights conventions by which Australia is bound, including the right to housing, and should clearly define the Federal Government’s obligations under international law to ‘respect, protect and fulfil’ human rights.
   - The Victorian Government should develop and adopt a Bill of Rights or legislated charter of human rights such as a Human Rights Act, that includes the right to adequate housing and the other economic, social and cultural rights necessary for realisation of the right to housing in Victoria.

‘It’s a human right, that’s what it comes back to, and they don’t see it like that.’

2 The Federal Government should develop and implement a National Housing and Taxation Plan that includes strategies to align the supply of affordable housing with the real demand for it.

‘It’s affordable housing and we’ve got to save the public housing we’ve got.’

3 Public and community housing are essential to meet the housing needs of many people on low incomes in Victoria. Both the Federal and the Victorian Governments should increase resources to public and community housing to a level that meets demand.

‘It doesn’t make sense that they haven’t got this legislation set up ... it doesn’t make sense to me that they haven’t got a charter to start off with ... You’d think the Ministry of Housing would be responsible because they’re a government body.’

4 The Victorian Government should support alternative housing models, which must be affordable to people on low incomes, accessible and appropriate to all sectors of the community – particularly those with special needs – and offer security of tenure.

‘There does have to be some kind of a waiting list, but they need to look at the system now and see that it’s just not working.’

5 The Office of Housing should work with people living in public and transitional housing, housing advocates and providers, to streamline access into properties, improve maintenance and accelerate the reallocation process, as a strategy to reduce current inefficiencies in the allocations and maintenance of public and transitional housing properties.

6 The Victorian Government should work with applicants for emergency, transitional and community housing and housing providers to develop mechanisms such as Common Assessment Tools and a centralised housing registration process, in order to minimise duplication, repetition, and the stress on applicants of current agency processes.
‘That’s the most basic human right, that no-one should have to spend even one night on the street.’

7 The Federal and the Victorian Governments should adequately resource homelessness assistance to ensure people do not have to be homeless in Victoria.

• Homelessness assistance, refuges, transitional housing and crisis accommodation services should be adequately resourced so they have enough well-trained staff to effectively support the diversity of people experiencing homelessness into stable accommodation.

• The Federal and Victorian Governments should provide adequate Housing Establishment Fund and Bond Assistance Resources to assist people to access and maintain private tenancies.

Affordability.

‘People, regardless of where they come from, have the right to affordable housing. Regardless of their background. It’s a basic human right.’

8 The Federal Government should ensure that people’s total housing costs, including utilities, insurance and related items, are not so high that they compromise people’s other basic needs or quality of life.

• People should not have to pay more than 25 per cent of their income on total housing costs in private, public or community housing.

9 The Federal Government should review the effectiveness of Commonwealth Rent Assistance and implement reforms:

• To ensure private rental housing is affordable to people on low incomes;

• To ensure all social security recipients, including those receiving Austudy, and people on low incomes have access to rent assistance.

‘It was either lose my kids because I couldn’t afford to dress them and feed them, lose the house because I couldn’t afford to pay for it, or lose my job. So I chose to give up the job.’

10 The Federal and Victorian Government should ensure rent-setting structures in public and community housing do not trap people in poverty by removing financial gain from income earned through work.

11 The Office of Housing should increase flexibility of rental payment methods to enable people to meet other essential costs of living.

12 The Victorian Government and the Office of Housing should work with people on low incomes to build and acquire well-located public and community housing that better matches the breadth and diversity of people’s needs. Areas of current unmet need include:

• One bedroom, self-contained properties accessible to young people, older people, single men and single women;

• Affordable properties appropriate to Indigenous and migrant communities, who often have large and extended families and visiting family and community members;

• Community residential units and accommodation that enables independent living in a community environment for older people;

• Sufficient accessible housing to meet demand by people with disabilities in Victoria.
‘I’ve got six kids and I’m on a pension and there is nowhere I can go that is going to be below $250 a week! It shouldn’t be allowed to get that high!’

‘In their planning projections into the future they could put aside areas where young people can buy or rent in, or people who are coming out of certain crisis situations can then afford to rent in a particular area.’

13 The Victorian Government should set targets for local governments requiring a proportion of rental housing in each local government area to be affordable and accessible to people on low incomes. Local governments should meet these targets using a variety of strategies including developer contributions, planning restrictions, direct funding and partnerships, and allocations of council land to affordable housing projects.

‘There should be a cap on rooming house rents – some of those private rooming houses have just skyrocketed’.

14 In response to the decline of private rooming and boarding houses in metropolitan Melbourne and the lack of affordable, appropriate alternatives for many of their residents, the Victorian Government should implement strategies for facilitating the retention and expansion of good quality, affordable and accessible private rooming and boarding houses. This could include:

- Programs offering financial support, including land tax exemptions, to socially-responsible owners of rooming and boarding houses, conditional on their complying with health and safety regulations and providing affordable accommodation to people on low incomes;
- Financial and other support to local councils and community agencies to encourage them to retain and operate rooming and boarding houses as not-for-profit accommodation.

‘I would not have had to move out of that house and sell it if I’d have got assistance, and it was cheaper paying the mortgage than the rent we’re paying now.’

15 The Federal and State Governments should consult with people on low incomes wishing to own their own homes, in order to develop appropriate and sustainable strategies to assist them to do so. These may include: incentives targeting those especially disadvantaged from home ownership, such as Indigenous people; schemes through which people on low incomes can purchase their public rental properties at reduced cost, and by which they could use rent as a deposit towards ownership in private and public rental properties.

Regulation and accountability.

‘There should be a standard that landlords should have to keep . . . for health reasons, with the carpet, walls, paint, leaks, plumbing.’

16 The Federal Government should develop a form of mortgage assistance, similar to rent assistance, to assist people on low incomes to sustain their mortgages.

17 In recognition of housing being an essential commodity, and the increasing number of Victorians on low incomes who are unable to obtain affordable private rental accommodation of a reasonable standard, the Victorian Government should introduce minimum housing standards and regulatory mechanisms covering structure and all forms of health and safety for private rental accommodation.
• These mechanisms should regulate rent chargeable on a private rental property on the basis of the value and standard of that property, and allow for rent reduction or compensation where properties fail to meet minimum standards.

• **Office of Housing** properties should also be covered by such standards, and rent reduction or compensation mechanisms should apply to public housing tenants where properties fail to meet minimum standards.

18 The **Federal Government** should amend the Building Code so that it ensures universal access to housing, including for people with disabilities. The **Victorian Government** should legislate to ensure universal access to housing, including for people with disabilities.

19 The **Victorian Government** should ensure that all new and existing public and private rental housing in Victoria has a minimum five-star energy efficiency rating, and provide assistance with building and appliances for people on low incomes to meet energy efficiency standards.

‘We need to have an independent body that can oversee and make sure peoples’ rights are met. An independent body – we don’t want like the police have got, with “police investigating police”.’

‘Accountability, for the governments, the departments, and social services. They’re out there to help us and they’re really not doing their job. They put the blame back on us, but it’s not really our fault because they’re not organised properly, and they’re not accountable for it.’

20 The **Victorian Government** should establish an independent statutory regulatory authority reporting to Parliament to regulate and enforce the provision of adequate public and private rental housing in Victoria.

• This authority should have the power to regulate housing providers. Providers subject to this authority should include the **Office of Housing**, real estate agents, community and supported housing providers, caravan park and rooming/boarding house proprietors, and other private landlords.

• This body should have the power to inspect public and private rental properties, to enforce compliance with minimum standards, and to regulate rent charged in the private market with regard to property standards and fairness.
21 The Victorian Government should establish a Housing Ombudsman, accessible by all Victorians, to monitor the compliance of housing providers with regulations and standards, to handle and investigate individual and systemic complaints, and to make recommendations to government on how to better realise the right to adequate housing in Victoria.

‘There should be a governing body set up to control and service the registered rooming houses. They should be policed on a regular basis, with set fines put in place for people who go outside those guidelines.’

22 The Federal and Victorian Governments should develop and enforce minimum standards of support to ensure that people living in supported accommodation, supported residential services, community rooming and boarding houses receive quality support services.

23 The Victorian Government should amend the Residential Tenancies Act to provide coverage to residents in community residential units and supported residential services.

24 Both Federal and Victorian anti-discrimination legislation should be changed to include “social status” as a prohibited ground of discrimination.

25 The Victorian Government should strengthen existing measures to prevent all forms of discrimination in the private rental market and ensure effective remedies for those experiencing discrimination.

26 The Federal and Victorian Governments should regulate Residential Tenancy Databases through legislation. Regulation should ensure that people have easy access to their personal information and a right of appeal.

27 The Victorian Government should ensure equity of access to all forms of public and community housing. Application, allocation and selection processes for public and community housing should be equitable, transparent, and accountable to an independent regulatory body and to applicants.

Safety and security.

‘Forced eviction is a gross violation of human rights, depriving women, men and children of the human right to adequate housing. The right to housing guarantees security of tenure and legal protection against forced eviction for all people.’

The Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions

28 The Victorian Government should strengthen the Residential Tenancies Act by removing the “no reason notice to vacate” provision that enables landlords to unfairly evict tenants.

29 The Victorian Government should strengthen tenants’ rights in relation to “notices to vacate” by ensuring that the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) takes account of tenants’ needs; expanding tenant advocacy services; and increasing community awareness of the right to appeal.

30 The Victorian Government should remove the “90 day rule” for caravan park residents so that they enjoy coverage under the Act from the first day of their residency.

‘You need to have some kind of standard across the board, not just that Joe Blow reckons you’re a nice bloke so you can stay.’

31 The Victorian Government should strengthen provisions of the Residential Tenancies Act to protect vulnerable residents – particularly those living in rooming and boarding houses, supported residential services, caravan parks, transitional and public housing properties – from unfair eviction and the threat of unfair eviction.

32 Recognising that safety in housing is a basic human right, the Victorian Government should review legislation and regulation of rooming and boarding houses and supported residential services to help ensure that residents can live free from violence.
The Federal Government should strengthen Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) legislation, and the Victorian Government should strengthen consumer rights mechanisms to help ensure people living in SAAP-funded services can live free from violence.

“The perpetrator needs to be moved on because otherwise we’re saying, “violence is against the law, but we’ll take you and the children away”!”

Recognising that the right to live free from violence is an important condition of the right to adequate housing for women and children, the Victorian Government should:

• Strengthen the provision for “exclusion orders” in the Crimes (Family Violence) Act to better facilitate the removal of perpetrators of violence from the home;
• Work with police, courts, and agencies to improve the operation of “exclusion” and other forms of intervention orders; and
• Implement other measures to improve the safety of women and children choosing to remain in their homes in these situations, in consultation with the appropriate services and communities.

The Federal Government should extend eligibility for the Centrelink crisis payment to women who remain in their home after the removal of a violent perpetrator.

The Federal and State Governments should also ensure the provision of alternate accommodation for women and children who have been made homeless because of domestic or family violence, as well as for perpetrators of violence to enable their exclusion from the family home.

Service provision.

“There once was the flexibility to go out and see these people, now there’s not that flexibility.”

Recognising that support and advocacy services are essential to assist people to access, remain in, and exercise their rights around housing, the Federal and State Governments should ensure that housing and homelessness support and advocacy services are funded to a level that meets demand in Victoria.

The Federal and State Governments should ensure that services providing specialist assistance with housing to particular communities, such as Migrant Resource Centres, Aboriginal Health Services, and services assisting asylum-seekers, refugees and holders of bridging visas are funded to a level that meets demand.

“You need to have some kind of standard across the board, not just that Joe Blow reckons you’re a nice bloke so you can stay.”
‘If they’re going to provide cheaper housing away from the city then they need to provide the services along with it.’

39 The Victorian Government should take into account the needs of outer suburban, rural and regional residents by ensuring the timely provision of frequent, affordable and accessible public transport, schools, affordable health care services, and shopping facilities to new housing developments.

40 The Victorian Government should ensure disability-accessible transport services are available within close proximity of all Victorian homes.

Rights and respect.

‘You have to fight for everything, instead of its being a right.’

41 The Federal Government should realise the right of all people to work and receive social security, including asylum-seekers, refugees and holders of bridging visas, as these rights are necessary for the fulfilment of the right to adequate housing.

42 The Federal Government should ensure minimum wages and social security payments are adequate to maintain a standard of living, including housing, that provides for the wellbeing of all people and their families.

43 Recognising that detention centres do not constitute adequate housing, the Federal Government should recognise the right not to be subject to arbitrary detention by ending the practice of mandatory detention of asylum-seekers.

44 The Federal and Victorian Governments should formally recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and acknowledge their rights to land and natural resources, through a Federal and State Bill of Rights.

‘Don’t demean us by your attitude. Don’t take us down further than we already are.’

‘They are supposedly trained in customer service, but they are the rudest mob that you could ever come across in your life.’
Recognising that everybody has the right to dignity and respect when living in housing and in the process of obtaining housing, the Office of Housing should develop training for their staff in cross-cultural awareness; understanding the experiences of people who have been homeless and people on low incomes; and customer service.

The Victorian Government should recognise the rights of people living in and accessing SAAP services and should adequately resource mechanisms for redress of rights violations.

‘My daughter, she say, “If I change school, I will kill myself.”’

The Office of Housing’s housing allocations process should allow people greater choice about the location of housing to ensure they can maintain links to schools, support services, family, friends and community, and are able to live in an area that is appropriate for them.

Consultation and participation.

‘Why doesn’t the Minister for Housing come down and have a look for themselves? Until they’re going to do that, they’re never going to do anything.’

‘Bronwyn Pike used to have a forum in North Melbourne ... she would come from the Ministry and she would listen to people. That was good.’

‘We have the right to be heard and expect an answer back, not just nothing, but a good answer, not just for the old but for the young.’

The Office of Housing should create regular opportunities for listening to, and communication with, people living in public housing.

‘I think you need to consult, not just ourselves who are in this type of accommodation, but people out there.’

‘Well, have a forum, where the people who are responsible come in person and this is what’s being said.’

‘They have to hear it. They have to see it. I mean, you have this big organisation of women who have gone through all this and, well, the government should be able to present the facts as they are. Say, this is what’s in place now, this is how many it’s helping, how many it’s not helping.’

‘The submission from people in housing, people like us. All the thoughts on this tape recorder should be put together in one general submission, everybody has a look at it and if they agree on it then put it to the government. You got to tell them, because if you don’t tell them, they’re not going to know.’

The Office of Housing, community housing providers, rooming houses, caravan parks, and congregate living providers such as community residential units should establish processes for tenants to be involved and represented in decision-making processes relating to provision, maintenance and management of their housing, and should better support tenants to participate in these processes.
‘One of the big things we’ve got to do is change attitudes. The attitude is, “It’s all your own bloody fault! You’re a bludger living on the system, you’re just pretending to be funny in the head so that you don’t have to work”. We’ve got to start caring about these people that are sometimes worse off than ourselves, but for ourselves as well.’

‘I think it’s better for us to get a chance to do things for ourselves, for people who have experienced homelessness ... in finding solutions to the problems we are facing ... So I think we have to be part of the solution too. We have to participate.’

‘I think we should all start shouting louder.’

‘One person can’t do a thing, but if you get a majority voice that goes to where they sit down in Canberra, maybe you’ll get something done ... A group of people, and a petition of maybe thousands. They will listen to thousands of people.’

‘The people who’ve got nothing to lose is us. We got nothing to lose, so we don’t give a shit.’

The Federal and Victorian Governments should better resource and support communities to organise and be engaged in policy debates and the realisation of their human rights, and create space for community movements to be heard in decision-making processes.
‘When you think of the money we got in this country, we should all be housed. I find it a total joke that anyone’s on the street.’

‘Stability, mate. A house, it can mean stability. And that’s what you build your foundations on.’

‘It’s not just housing. To us, it’s a home.’

‘It means having good windows so you can see the sky. Perhaps a little patch of garden, some place to hang your washing . . .’

‘We don’t need Buckingham Palace – anyway, it’d cost too much to heat!’

‘A sense of family. It doesn’t matter who you are. We all want to belong to something.’

‘It’s about having a roof over your head and food in your stomach. That’s home.’