

Consultation to the Department of Communities & Justice on the NSW Homelessness Strategy 2025-2035

About the Women's and Girls' Emergency Centre

Women's and Girls' Emergency Centre (WAGEC) is a Specialist Homelessness Service (SHS) and feminist not-for-profit organisation that has been supporting women and children in crisis since 1977. Every night, WAGEC supports over 200 women and children escaping domestic violence, homelessness and systemic disadvantage. We do this by providing material aid, case management, wrap-around support, accommodation and crisis response.

WAGEC operates a drop-in centre, four crisis refuge accommodation sites and 45 transitional properties. We also deliver:

- **Crisis response and accommodation:** We provide immediate solutions to women and families in crisis including crisis response, shelter, material aid and case management
- **Tailored programs:** Our targeted programs work to break the cycle of violence and social disadvantage by providing tailored support that restores safety and addresses the specific needs of women and children escaping violence.
- **Primary Prevention initiatives:** We seek to stop violence before it starts by addressing the underlying drivers of gender-based violence through advocacy, workplace training and community education.

Our vision is to end gender-based violence in a generation.

WAGEC is based in Sydney and operates refuge sites on the unceded lands of the Gadigal, Wangal and Dharawal people of the Eora Nation. We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of country and pay our respect to Elders past and present. We also acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up 20% of people experiencing homelessness in Australia.¹

WAGEC acknowledges our responsibility as a non-Indigenous organisation to ensure the culturally responsive delivery of services to First Nations clients and to use our voice and spaces of privilege to amplify the advocacy of generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who have come before us and continue to do this work to make communities safer.

¹ *Estimating Homelessness: Census, 2021*, Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021) <
<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/housing/estimating-homelessness-census/latest-release>>

The experiences and drivers of homelessness for women are gendered

Recommendation 1: Intersectional housing solutions that are informed by and responsive to the gendered drivers and experiences of homelessness for women

Homelessness for women is complex and exists in the context of compounding inequalities and a national crisis of gender-based violence. The ongoing impacts of gender inequality, including violence against women, the gender pay gap, lower incomes, and a lack of affordable housing, drive increasing rates of homelessness for women and their dependent children.

Solutions proposed under the NSW Homelessness Strategy (the Strategy) must reflect and respond to the gendered drivers and experiences of homelessness, including:

Women experiencing domestic violence

Domestic and family violence is the leading cause of homelessness for women and children in Australia.² Almost half of women seeking support from a SHS cited fleeing domestic violence as the main driver of homelessness.

Many women experiencing violence are forced to decide between becoming homeless or remaining in a relationship with their perpetrator. With one woman being killed by her current or former partner every four days, this is an unfathomable decision that could cost a life.³ Insufficient housing support and homelessness drives thousands of women to return to their violent partners.⁴

To be effective, the Strategy must be responsive to the intersectional needs of women and children who are victim-survivors of domestic violence.

First Nations women

The rate of First Nations women experiencing homelessness is also increasing, with 16,535 Indigenous women and girls seeking SHS support each month.⁵ The disproportionately high rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing homelessness is compounded by structural discrimination and the ongoing detrimental impacts of colonisation.

² 'Homelessness and domestic and family violence: State of response report 2024', Homelessness Australia (2024) <<https://homelessnessaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/IWD-2024-3.pdf>>

³ 'Unlocking the Prevention Potential: accelerating action to end domestic, family and sexual violence', Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (2024) <<https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/unlocking-prevention-potential/national-emergency-and-ongoing-national-priority#:~:text=On%2028%20April%202024%2C%20the,being%20killed%20every%20four%20days.&text=On%201%20May%202024%2C%20National,which%20should%20not%20be%20underestimated.>>>

⁴ 'Homelessness and domestic and family violence: State of response report 2024', Homelessness Australia (2024) <<https://homelessnessaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/IWD-2024-3.pdf>>

⁵ 'First Nations women worst affected by the housing crisis', Homelessness Australia (2023) <<https://homelessnessaustralia.org.au/first-nations-women-worst-affected-by-the-housing-crisis/>>

To ensure cultural safety, housing solutions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be designed in consultation with and be led by community.

Older women

The number of 55-74 year old women seeking support from homelessness services has increased by 55% over the past ten years.⁶ This is driven by the cumulative impact of systemic inequality over a life time, including the gender pay and superannuation gaps. Individual situational factors, including death of a spouse, illness, and inability to re-enter the workforce, also increase this risk.⁷ Older women are the fastest growing cohort of people experiencing homelessness. The Strategy should propose solutions to reflect and remedy this statistic.

Women leaving incarceration

Limited access to immediate housing for women leaving incarceration means that many are leaving prison directly into homelessness. The recidivism rate for women leaving incarceration in NSW is approximately 40%, largely due to unsafe or unstable housing.⁸

WAGEC operates a program tailored to the needs of these women, and have demonstrated how secure housing facilitates effective rehabilitation and successful re-entry into the community after incarceration. We encourage the inclusion of diversionary programs and post-release support for women leaving incarceration under the Strategy.

Non-resident women

Limited government support and legal protection presents a significant barrier to women on visas and non-resident women accessing crisis accommodation. Non-resident women are most often ineligible for support through Centrelink or Medicare due to stringent eligibility criteria. In the absence of government and other supports, around one third of WAGEC's clients are non-resident women who are entirely dependent on WAGEC for any income, or medical care including medicine. We encourage consideration of this cohort of women under the Strategy.

⁶ 'Understand why older women are the fastest growing cohort of homeless people', Older Women's Network New South Wales <<https://ownnsw.org.au/our-work/homelessness/>>

⁷ 'Understand why older women are the fastest growing cohort of homeless people', Older Women's Network New South Wales <<https://ownnsw.org.au/our-work/homelessness/>>

⁸ 'The importance of housing for women coming out of prison', Keeping Women Out Of Prison Coalition (2020) <https://www.sydneycommunityfoundation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/KWOOP-PS-No-7-Housing_15Oct20.pdf>

No child should be homeless

Recommendation 2: Children need tailored solutions under the NSW Strategy

Children and young people make up 40% of our client base at WAGEC. One in seven people experiencing homelessness are under the age of 12.⁹

No child should experience homelessness and yet, at WAGEC, we have clients aged two and under who have never known life outside of emergency accommodation.

Homelessness and trauma impact every aspect of a child's development and can prevent their educational, social, development and emotional needs from being met. Solutions under the Strategy must consider children as victim-survivors and clients in their own right and seek to prevent them from experiencing homelessness at all.

Making homelessness rare

Recommendation 3: Investment in violence prevention is investment in homelessness prevention

Homelessness for women and children will not be rare so long as gender-based violence persists.

In the short term, solutions and supports that remove the perpetrator of violence from the home provide women and children with an automatic path to safe housing without the need for crisis accommodation or an experience of homelessness. As such, increased investment in programs such as Staying Home Leaving Violence will reduce homelessness for women and their children.

WAGEC also recommend greater investment in primary prevention initiatives to stop gender-based violence from occurring in the first place. By addressing the underlying causes and attitudes that drive violence, primary prevention seeks to generate whole-of-community change to minimize, and eventually eradicate, gender-based violence. The reduction of domestic violence will inevitably reduce rates of homelessness for women and children.

WAGEC are at the forefront of violence prevention initiatives in NSW and have demonstrated success in shifting attitudes that condone violence. Greater investment in such activities will increase their effectiveness, reach and impact.

Making homelessness brief

Recommendation 4: Investment in immediate access to crisis accommodation

Almost 295 people are turned away from SHS's each day, 80% of whom are women and children. WAGEC provides shelter to over 200 women and children each night but demand for our service continues to increase.

⁹ *Estimating Homelessness: Census, 2021*, Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021)
<<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/housing/estimating-homelessness-census/latest-release>>

As a sector, SHS's do not have capacity to service each person who requires emergency accommodation. This puts pressure on an already overstretched frontline who are faced with deciding which families get access to a bed and who remains homeless.

Increasing the capacity of crisis accommodation services is crucial for facilitating immediate access to safety for women and children entering homelessness after escaping domestic and family violence.

The scaling of capacity should not be limited to metropolitan areas and should extend to every community statewide.

Recommendation 5: Increase access to medium-term accommodation with strengthened pathways to long-term permanent affordable housing

The current waitlist for social housing in NSW can exceed ten years. This traps women and children in cycles of homelessness, or forces them into unsafe environments for up to a decade. In some areas, there are no available properties to meet individual needs.¹⁰

For the women who do get access to refuge accommodation, 42% leave with no long term housing solutions in place. The rate of women and children leaving crisis and transitional accommodation back into homelessness is increasing, largely due to lack of affordable housing.¹¹

All solutions and infrastructure proposed under the NSW Homelessness Strategy need to be developed with pathways to **permanent** affordable housing. We recommend an approach that bolsters front line services while addressing the severe shortage in long-term housing solutions to break the current cycle of homelessness. Support for crisis and transitional accommodation services and infrastructure should not detract from long-term housing solutions.

Recommendation 6: Adequately funding the high-skilled workforce delivering services proposed under the Strategy

Supporting skilled staff

Frontline responses to homelessness and the factors that drive it require a highly skilled workforce. As the housing crisis continues to worsen, maintaining that workforce grows more challenging with staff struggling to afford their own rent. It is not just clients of SHS's who are impacted by the housing crisis. Staff delivering these services are also experiencing housing stress, with some at risk of homelessness themselves. Funding provided under SHS contracts should reflect the skills and needs

¹⁰ 'Guide to waiting times for social housing as at June 30 2024', NSW Department of Communities and Justice (2024) <<https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/housing/help/applying-assistance/expected-waiting-times>>

¹¹ 'Homelessness and domestic and family violence: State of response report 2024', Homelessness Australia (2024) <<https://homelessnessaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/IWD-2024-3.pdf>>

of staff by increasing wages so the workforce has greater access to housing security, and thus can remain working in the sector.

Resourcing SHS's for the full extent of work undertaken

Under SHS contracts, organisations are given a target number of clients to support. WAGEC is not alone in overservicing these contracts and significantly exceeding targets. Funding for services and solutions delivered under the Strategy need to cover the costs of each client so SHS's aren't left under-resourced as they respond to increasing and unrelenting demand.

Funding independent specialist services

Independent, non-religious specialist services are crucial to facilitating safe access to support for those who identify as LGBTQIA+, culturally and linguistically diverse, victim-survivors of violence and those of diverse faiths. In the recommissioning of SHS contracts, WAGEC strongly encourages increased funding and safeguards for independent services to ensure clients have choice and autonomy in selecting support.

Making homelessness non-repeated

Recommendation 7: A Housing First approach is essential in all solutions developed under the Strategy

Housing is a human right. WAGEC endorse the Housing First approach proposed under the Strategy, including investment in long-term infrastructure, organisations and workforces that can provide flexible support to people experiencing homelessness as long as it is required.

Recommendation 8: Greater access to permanent secure housing is essential to breaking the cycle of homelessness

WAGEC recommend investment in long-term affordable housing solutions in every community in NSW. Increased access to dedicated long-term housing that is secure and affordable will stop people from oscillating between homelessness and crisis accommodation. In improving housing infrastructure and affordable housing supply in every community, rates of homelessness will decrease statewide.

Every community has their own needs. For this process to be equitable, infrastructure should be bolstered in each region and not be limited to metropolitan areas. WAGEC encourage the building of increased affordable housing near crisis accommodation sites to prevent clients needing to relocate after rebuilding their lives during their time in refuge.

Summary of recommendations

Recommendation 1: Responsive and intersectional housing solutions that are informed by the gendered drivers and experiences of homelessness for women

Homelessness for women is complex and exists in the context of compounding inequalities and a national crisis of gender-based violence. Solutions proposed under the Strategy must be responsive to the gendered drivers of homelessness and provide

intersectional support for women experiencing domestic violence, First Nations women, women leaving incarceration, older women, and non-resident women.

Recommendation 2: Children need tailored solutions under the NSW Strategy

No child should be homeless. Housing solutions under the strategy must consider the unique developmental needs of children and respect them as victim-survivors and clients in their own right. All solutions should be delivered with a view to prevent children from ever experiencing homelessness.

Recommendation 3: Investment in violence prevention is investment in homelessness prevention

The reduction of domestic violence will intrinsically reduce rates of homelessness for women and children. WAGEC recommend greater investment in primary prevention initiatives to stop gender-based violence from occurring in the first place.

Recommendation 4: Investment in immediate access to crisis accommodation

Increasing the capacity of crisis accommodation services is crucial for facilitating immediate access to safety for women and children entering homelessness after escaping domestic and family violence.

Recommendation 5: Increase in medium-term accommodation with strengthened pathways to long-term permanent affordable housing

All solutions and infrastructure proposed under the NSW Homelessness Strategy need to be developed with pathways to **permanent** affordable housing. We recommend an approach that bolsters front line services while addressing the severe shortage in long-term housing solutions to break the current cycle of homelessness.

Recommendation 6: Adequately funding the high-skilled workforce delivering services proposed under the Strategy

Funding provided under SHS contracts should reflect the skills and needs of staff by increasing wages so the workforce has greater access to housing security. Funding for services and solutions delivered under the Strategy also need to cover the costs of each client so SHS's aren't left under-resourced as they respond to increasing and unrelenting demand.

Recommendation 7: A Housing First approach is essential in all solutions developed under the Strategy

WAGEC endorse the Housing First approach proposed under the Strategy, including investment in infrastructure, organisations and workforces that can provide flexible support to people experiencing homelessness as long as it is required.

Recommendation 8: Greater access to permanent secure housing is essential to breaking the cycle of homelessness

WAGEC recommend investment in long-term affordable housing solutions in every community in NSW. Increased access to dedicated long-term housing that is secure



and affordable will stop people from oscillating between homelessness and crisis accommodation.

Contact

If you have any questions in relation to this submission, please contact CEO Nicole Yade via nicole.yade@wagec.org.au.