

Submission to Housing Australia on the draft amendments to the Housing Australia Investment Mandate Direction 2018

About the Women's and Girls' Emergency Centre

Women's and Girls' Emergency Centre (WAGEC) is a Specialist Homelessness Service 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 Tradition 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

¹ *Estimating Homelessness: Census, 2021, Australian Bureau of Statistics*

The need for increased funding of crisis and transitional accommodation

Demand for crisis accommodation is increasing

Demand for Specialist Homelessness Services continues to surge. Every day almost 295 people are turned away from Specialist Homelessness Services due to limited capacity, around 80% of whom are women and children.² As a sector, there are grossly insufficient numbers of beds available to the women and children whose safety, security and lives depend on them.

On any given night, WAGEC provides shelter to over 200 women and children but demand for our services is only increasing. Operating at a constantly full capacity means that WAGEC, like other Specialist Homelessness Services, is forced to make difficult decisions about who gets access to refuge accommodation every day. These are decisions that weigh heavily on an already overstretched frontline.

The impact of housing crisis on women and children escaping domestic and family violence

Domestic and family violence is the leading cause of homelessness for women and children in Australia, with 45% of women identifying violence as a driver. Insufficient access to crisis accommodation puts women experiencing domestic violence in a position where they must decide whether to face homelessness or remain in an abusive relationship. Lack of financial and housing support is cited as a contributing reason that women return to or remain with violent partners.³ With one woman losing her life to domestic violence every four days, we recognise that this is a decision that could cost a woman her life.⁴

Immediate access to safe and secure housing after crisis

Targeting additional funding towards crisis and transitional accommodation is crucial for facilitating immediate access to safety for women and children escaping domestic and family violence. Improving access to immediate and secure housing for women and children escaping violence is a crucial first step to facilitating safety and recovery.

On crisis and transitional accommodation

The amendment to the Mandate defines crisis and transitional housing as 'short-term'. WAGEC recommends a broad interpretation of this definition to allow for tailored care approaches, particularly for clients who may require longer-term accommodation. Women on temporary or other visas often face additional challenges in accessing crisis, transition and long-term accommodation due to their limited access to social services and legal protections.

² 'Peak housing bodies and unions urge end to funding uncertainty', Homelessness Australia (2024) <<https://homelessnessaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/240223-rel-HA-Ministers-Meet-1.pdf>>

³ '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>>

⁴ Destroy the Joint, Counting Dead Women (2024), accessed 6/09/24 <<https://www.facebook.com/DestroyTheJoint/>>

Limited access to long-term affordable housing

While funding for crisis accommodation is essential, it must be viewed within the broader context of systemic issues in social housing.

In NSW, the waitlist for social housing can exceed ten years, trapping women and children in transitional accommodations or forcing them into unsafe environments. The rate of women and children leaving crisis or transitional accommodation to re-enter homelessness is also increasing,⁵ with significant delays creating insurmountable barriers to securing affordable housing. A 2021 AIHW report indicated that 42% of clients exiting crisis accommodation still had no long-term housing solution in place.⁶

WAGEC advocates for policies that ensure crisis responses are part of a broader continuum of care that includes pathways to permanent, affordable housing. We recommend a dual approach that also addresses the severe shortfall in long-term social housing to prevent a bottle-neck that forces women and children back into unsafe situations after accessing support. The focus on crisis and transitional accommodation should not detract from the need for long-term housing solutions.

Secure housing is essential to ending gender-based violence in a generation

Recognizing the intersectional needs of victim-survivors of domestic violence

We commend this investment's alignment with Action 10 under the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children to:

Improve access to short-term medium and long-term housing for women and children experiencing violence, including those living in institutional settings, and supporting women to stay in their own homes when they choose to do so.

Infrastructure plans to improve access to housing must be responsive to the intersectional needs of women and children who are victim-survivors of domestic violence.

All housing and infrastructure developed under this funding should be culturally safe, inclusive and accessible for all women and children. We recommend consideration of the following as priority cohorts for eligibility to any housing developed under the Mandate:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children
- Culturally and linguistically diverse women and children
- Women and children on temporary visas, including non-resident women and children
- Women and children with disabilities

⁵ '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>>

⁶ Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2022-2023, AIHW <<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/contents/clients-who-experienced-fdv>>

- LGBTQIA+ women and children
- Women leaving incarceration, particularly pregnant women and women with children
- Children with incarcerated parents
- Women and children in regional, rural and remote areas

Priority housing for pregnant women and mothers leaving incarceration

Homelessness is often the most significant hurdle that women face when being released from custody. Lack of access to immediate housing for women leaving prison can lead women to face homelessness, recidivism, or return to a violent partner. Specific housing support for mothers reduces the impacts of intergeneration trauma, prevents children from entering into out of home care and stops the cycle of imprisonment. WAGEC operates a refuge specifically tailored to the needs of these women, and have seen how secure housing facilitates effective rehabilitation and re-entry into the community after incarceration.

Eligibility for women on visas and non-resident women and children

Women on visas and non-resident women face additional challenges in accessing crisis accommodation after leaving violence due to their limited access to social services and legal protections. Around one third of WAGEC's clients are non-resident women who are entirely dependent on WAGEC in the absence of government support. Providing support to these women and children often falls outside of the scope of our funding due to limited eligibility criteria. We recommend ensuring that a portion of the housing and infrastructure developed under the Mandate is apportioned to women on visas and non-resident women and children.

The need for additional frontline funding alongside growth in infrastructure

The role of specialist services

Whilst WAGEC endorses any increase in funding towards housing for women and children, it is vital to recognise the critical role of specialized organizations to support those accessing the services.

The delivery of holistic, trauma-informed support services that address the broader spectrum of challenges these individuals face whilst in short-term accommodation is essential in preventing re-entry into homelessness or violent relationships. Specialist services like WAGEC bring a comprehensive understanding of the unique challenges faced by women and children in these circumstances, including the ability to address financial abuse, visa abuse, coercive control and other emerging forms of violence.

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.

We recommend additional funding for independent specialist domestic violence and homelessness services to facilitate the clients who will be accessing the housing and infrastructure developed under the mandate.

Urgent action will save lives

The benefits of swift action

A 12-month time limit is likely to incentivize quick action, leading to faster deployment of crisis and transitional accommodation. Given that 10,000 women return to a violent partner each year due to a lack of alternative accommodation, rapid deployment of funds could be life-saving.

However short-term solutions must be balanced with long-term sustainability. WAGEC advocates for ensuring that any projects funded within this timeframe contribute to a sustainable housing strategy that provides ongoing support and long-term or permanent housing options for women and children escaping violence.

Summary of recommendations

- **Recommendation 1: Broad interpretation of definitions under the Mandate**
Broad definitions will allow for tailored care approaches, particularly for clients who may require longer-term accommodation.
- **Recommendation 2: Dual approach to housing solutions**
Crisis and transitional housing and infrastructure solutions should not detract from the need for long-term affordable housing.
- **Recommendation 3: Priority cohorts for accessing housing developed under the Mandate**
Women experiencing multiple and compounding disadvantage should be considered priority cohorts and be granted priority access to any additional housing developed under the Mandate. We recommend significant apportionment of housing projects that prioritise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women and mothers leaving incarceration, non-resident women, and women on temporary visas.
- **Recommendation 4: Additional funding for frontline services alongside infrastructure solutions**
Significant additional funding for specialist domestic violence and homelessness services is necessary to support the clients who will be accessing the housing and infrastructure developed under the mandate.
- **Recommendation 5: Sustainable solutions are necessary to ease burden of housing crisis**
Housing and infrastructure projects funded under the Mandate should contribute to a sustainable housing strategy that will provide ongoing support and long-term secure housing to women and children escaping violence.



Contact

If you have any questions in relation to this submission, please contact CEO Nicole Yade via Nicole.yade@wagec.org.au or Director of Fundraising and Communities, Rachael Phillips, via rachael.phillips@wagec.org.au.