Submission to the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee

Quantum Support Services (Quantum) is an independent not-for-profit organisation whose proud history demonstrates over 30 years of providing accessible, high quality advocacy and support services to meet the needs of the Gippsland community.

Quantum is grateful for the opportunity to make a submission to the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee. As a leading service provider to people experiencing homelessness or housing stress in Gippsland we have a longstanding and strong interest in assisting the Committee and welcome the focus that has been given to homelessness by this inquiry.

This feedback draws on our expertise and practical knowledge in providing services to people who experience homelessness or are at risk of homelessness. This submission highlights a number of issues and potential solutions through the lens of the challenges in Gippsland region. Gippsland is a large rural region located in the south east of Victoria. It extends from the outer Melbourne metropolitan region to New South Wales boarder. There are pockets of social-economic disadvantage across Gippsland with high percentage of people on low incomes, higher than the state average. The Latrobe Valley is one local government area that has significant disadvantage and is ranked the seventh highest disadvantaged community in Australia.[1]

We are encouraged that the Victorian Parliament has taken a strong interest in homelessness and look forward to the deliberations and recommendations of this Committee.

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[1] Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011.

1. Increase availability of affordable housing

Quantum continues to record an increase in demand for affordable accommodation in Gippsland. Housing became less affordable over the last decade and incomes had not kept pace with this.[2] The unaffordability of the bulk of rental properties drives more people into homelessness and limits the ability of those formerly homeless in social housing to make the transition into private rentals.[3] For low income Gippslanders the private rental market is increasingly competitive, unaffordable and difficult to access. A recent report suggested that Moe and Morwell are areas offering affordable rentals, based on Victorian household incomes of $37,800. However, the median income in Morwell (State Electorate) is $29,172 per annum,[4] pricing them out of much of the private rental market in their local area. Nearly one-third (27 per cent) of households in Morwell earn less than $33,800 per annum, or $650 per week.[5]

The situation in the region is further exacerbated by Melbourne's growth which put pressure on Gippsland, with many people moving to the region in search of cheaper housing. This increasing housing demand negatively impacts local supply, driving up house prices and rents. Gippsland, along with other regional areas of Victoria, recorded a decrease in the number of new lettings by 7.7 per cent since September 2018 to September 2019.[6]

It is increasingly difficult and essentially impossible for people on Newstart or other Centrelink payments to obtain private rental. The competition is fierce and most real estate agents in Gippsland have very strict criteria in terms of interviews, providing bank statements, employment details, references, etc. People on a low income, welfare payments or a history of housing concerns are unable to compete in this market. This pushes many from regional centres into smaller rural communities in search of affordable housing where they find themselves with fewer job prospects, transport options and support services.

The problem is most serious for singles and for single parents with just one child. The recent rental affordability report by the Department of Health and Human Services indicated that only 25 one-bedroom properties were affordable in all of Gippsland.[7] This practically leaves

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[2] Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI), *Inquiry into funding and delivery of programs to reduce homelessness* (April 2017), <doi:10.18408/ahuri-8209001> .

[3] Ibid.

[4] ABS Census, 2016.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Department of Health and Human Services, *Rental Report September Quarter 2019*.

[7] Ibid.

the lowest income earners with nowhere to go. In Gippsland, many single working men are left living in boarding houses or sleeping in cars. Even families with two working parents left sleeping in vehicles as they cannot afford private rentals. It is clear that we cannot address homelessness without increasing access to safe, secure and affordable housing.

Solution:

Quantum recommends to the Committee to explore 'tiny homes' as an innovative solution. Internationally, 'tiny home villages' have proven to be an effective response to homelessness. These tiny houses provide a transitional option for those who are experiencing or are at-risk of homelessness, and with the right support, can help them reach independence and long-term sustainable housing.

In addition, we recommend to introduce 'rental rehabilitation' educational programs in these villages for people who have no rental history or a poor rental history. In essence it would be an educational program partnered with a short term lease of 6 months to a year. Once the person has completed the program while maintaining their lease in the 'tiny home village', they would be provided with evidence of this in the form of a certification that would be recognised by real estate agents and landlords when making applications for private rental properties. This would provide an advantage to a person who previously would not have been considered based on their history or application.

Furthermore, Quantum advocates for an increase in the funding for Tenancy Plus Program. This program is focused on helping people to establish a tenancy (or supporting people to stay in housing) if they have a poor rental history or an ongoing failure of tenancies in the past. Currently, Quantum funded for 4.22 equivalent to full time positions. This will need to at least double to accommodate 96 people on our waiting lists.

2. Prevent tenancy breakdowns

Evictions contribute to approximately 40 per cent of homelessness in Victoria,[8] and the number of Victorians 'evicted into homelessness' has more than doubled in the past five years.[9] The most common reasons we see our clients facing eviction into homelessness are

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[8] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2016–17*.

[9] The Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) noted figures from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), which showed that 43,751 people presented at Victorian homelessness services due to eviction last financial year. In 2011-2012, that figure was only 17,930 people. https://chp.org.au/evictions-homelessness-double-rents-soar/.

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rental arrears, lack of support around living skills, budgeting, mental health and drugs/alcohol issues.

It is presently very easy for tenants in Gippsland to be evicted for arrears. We are seeing an increase in evictions in private rental due to fears around the current rental reforms and resent amendments to the *Residential Tenancies Act,* and it is only getting worse. While the reforms were designed to better protect tenants, such as making it easier for tenants to make modifications to rental properties, the staggered implementation and advertisement of the reforms caused some landlords and specifically real estate agents to be miseducated. We have recorded a significant increase in tenants being evicted at the end of their fixed-term tenancies so that the landlord can sell their property.

Solution:

Only increased access to early intervention and prevention services, adequate support and a combination of legal representation, financial brokerage and social work assistance helps our clients from these unnecessary evictions. Quantum recommends to the Committee to focus on early intervention by preventing tenancies from breaking down with particular focus on educational support programs around living skills—budgeting, cleaning, etc.

In addition, Quantum commends the success of Private Rental Assistance Program (PRAP) which is focused on keeping people in their homes. PRAP is a very important tool we have in preventing homelessness. We are pleased that the program has been re-funded and extended. We recommend recruitment of case management positions in PRAP and PRAP Plus in line with increased homelessness statistics.

3. Build more public and community housing

There is an urgent need to invest in more social housing. Currently, there is very little social housing stock with over 80 thousand people on the state-wide social housing wait list, including 25 thousand children.[10] At 3.5 per cent Victoria has the lowest level of public and community housing supply in Australia.[11] This at least needs to be brought up to 4.4 to meet

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[10] Parliament of Victoria, *Inquiry into the Public Housing Renewal program* (2018) <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/committees/SCLSI/Public_Housing_Renewal_Program/LSIC_58-11_PHRP_Text_WEB.pdf>.

[11] https://chp.org.au/the-whittlesea-declaration-we-need-3000-new-homes-every-year-for-a-decade/

the national average.[12] Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute has identified that Victoria has a shortfall of 102,800 social housing properties.[13] Victoria has the strongest growth in population. In 2018 Victoria's population increased by 86,000 due to overseas migrants. The number of people waiting for social housing is growing by 500 people each month.[14] The situation is even worse in Gippsland. Regional communities are crying out for more social housing. We have clients waiting for 5-10 years and more for assistance. The situation is further exacerbated following the impact of bushfires in Gippsland.

Solution:

We cannot end homelessness without more homes. It is essential to build more public and community housing to accommodate 2,808 people currently on social house wait list in Inner and Outer Gippsland,[15] especially one/two bedroom properties for single people. Building more social housing will provide exit points from transitional housing and will lower the cost of private rental. In addition, it is essential for government to make a commitment to provide increased social housing each year based on a percentage of the annual population increase.

Quantum advocates for an increase in Housing First programs - moving people with complex needs experiencing homelessness into permanent housing with flexible and individual support for as long as needed. Australian and international evidence strongly supports Housing First programs in addressing homelessness. When we look at Maslow's hierarchy of needs, housing can assist in supporting many of the underlying issues. People need basic necessities like food and a place to live before addressing other issues, such as getting a job, budgeting, or drug and alcohol abuse.

Lastly, Quantum advocates for a better utilisation of departmental houses. We come across a lot of single people living in four-bedroom properties. There are specific sections of the Residential Tenancies Act that allow for the department to take steps to review and reallocate based on individual circumstances.

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[12] This could also be compared to 20 per cent stocks in countries like Denmark. https://chp.org.au/the-whittlesea-declaration-we-need-3000-new-homes-every-year-for-a-decade/

[13] https://chp.org.au/media-releases/homelessness-initiatives-welcome-but-more-action-needed-to-deliver-social-housing/.

[14] Victorian Parliamentary inquiry into social housing 2018.

[15] Victorian Housing register and transfer list (December 2019).

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4. Focus on transitioning to long-term and permanent housing solutions from short and medium term accommodation

Transitional accommodation is not working in the manner that it is intended when there are no exit points. With stays in transitional housing around 13 weeks, it is impossible for people to be housed in public or community housing given the waitlist. This leads to people staying in the transitional housing much longer, which means that the next person who comes through the door can't be accommodated.

On a weekly basis Quantum has over 10 applications within the Transitional Housing Program and only 1 or 2 properties available. This leaves individuals experiencing vulnerabilities to seek shelter in motels, boarding houses or sleeping in cars and unable to access and obtain even the most basic essentials. This causes further disadvantage and vulnerability increasing disconnection to family, community and self.

Similarly, crisis accommodations can only be effectively managed where there are appropriate, affordable and accessible exit options. This is not the case across Gippsland which forces service providers to move already vulnerable people from one crisis accommodation to another. Currently Quantum's crisis funded programs are spending a significant portion of their allocated brokerage on crisis accommodation in local motels and boarding houses. Lack of appropriate cooking facilities in crisis accommodation such as motels keeps people in financial disadvantage because they're using their money on takeaway which is more expensive than cooking and keeping food. At Quantum we regularly see large families, some with up to six members, and have no choice but to place them in motel rooms. In one instance we had a family of eleven. This solution is not only inappropriate but unsustainable.

This situation is further aggravated during holiday periods when the number of available crisis properties reduces significantly leaving families sleeping in cars or on the streets. In addition, we are regularly observing Melbourne support services placing their clients in crisis accommodation, often boarding houses, in the Gippsland region. This pushes people to even more rural remote settings where job opportunities are non-existent, transport is minimal if any and there is genuine lack of support services.

Solution:

Continued Government's commitment to provide people with long-term accommodation, as well as to provide appropriate support services that help them maintain that tenancy (such as Housing First programs) is essential. Purchasing beds from motels with very poor amenities is expensive, unsafe, and it further traumatises very vulnerable families and individuals.

5. Progress to outcomes-based funding to provide tailored wraparound response

Present funding models are characterised by placing the emphasis on achieving targets rather than providing flexible person-centred care. Often our clients report to us that they feel like a statistic throughout the entire process. The current system is very much designed around time limited, short periods of care that are a 'one size fits all'. It is very difficult for us to tailor services to respond to individual needs. For example, a family with four children has very different needs from a single person with a pet. These barriers are further exacerbated by the excessive paperwork requirements within the sector leaving our workers only able to spend about 25% of their time (on average) actually working with clients.

We need flexible, tailored, individualised support for those with multiple and complex needs. It essential to focus on holistic and whole-of-life context of social health, human rights, environmental adversity and social disadvantage in supporting our clients. There is a need for a multiservice wraparound response to ensure that our clients have their needs appropriately assessed and responded to – the approach similar to the Orange Door with a broader support where there is one entry point providing a social health and wellbeing model of service delivery where multiple services are present and are working to the same eligibility, assessment clients and frameworks. Currently clients are moved from one service to the next retelling their story and often remaining homeless.

When a person comes in with complex needs—they are dealing with family violence, traumas, child protection - we want to be able to provide a service that wraps around so we can work with them as long as we need to and address their complex needs. Only then can we truly address their homelessness situation and prevent reoccurrence.

Solution:

It is important to focus on a continuum of care that allows the system to work in a very tailored, flexible and responsive way to meet people's needs and deliver an outcome for them, not be locked into six or thirteen weeks' time frames. Support must be tailored to an outcome not the timeframe. The learnings of the Better Futures model of support is recommended as an approach for all homelessness activities – this proactive model provides young people with different levels of support which flex up and down according to their needs.[16]*In balancing the*

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[16] Young people may be placed on **active hold**, receive **limited support** or **active support.** The level of support a young person receives will be determined by the Better Futures worker in consultation with the young person and/or the care team. The level of support provided is likely to change over time, with the changing needs of the young person.

need for homelessness reduction targets, there needs to be a focus on outcomes, particularly on the quality of services which recognise that people have needs that vary enormously, and the system needs to be flexible in responding to them.

We strongly advocate for reformed funding models enabling flexibility and a system that is able to provide accommodation that meets the needs of our clients, that treats them with respect and that allows them to maintain their dignity. It needs to be flexible to enable workers to spend more time with their clients. It is necessary so that people experiencing homelessness are able to move out of that period of homelessness as quickly as possible and that their individual needs can be meet; that the professionalism and quality of those services is increased, through social health team model of care, to reduce the long-term impact on the individual or family and potential re-occurrence of homelessness.

6. Focus on streamlining services and dissolving siloes

Currently the system has fundamental structural shortcomings. Services and programs are not well linked or integrated. From our practice it is evident that people experiencing homelessness often come into contact with family violence services, justice, disability support, child protection and Centrelink. However, these services mostly operate in siloes and fail at providing a wrap-around support much needed for clients to receive the best care in a timely manner. This lack of communication worsens with remoteness. As a result, we have very vulnerable people navigating very complex service systems.

For example, Quantum manages the Mental Health Pathways program which aims to provide housing information and advice to people who are exiting a psychiatric inpatient facility and who may experience homelessness or be at risk of homelessness. We are often faced with situations when our clients experiencing mental ill-health are simply released into homelessness following a couple days of treatment due to unavailability of services or lack of communication.

Solution:

It is essential for the Committee to consider how to improve service integration and navigation to achieve better outcomes for our clients. It is necessary to bring down the barriers between services for a more holistic approach because currently even our workforce finds it difficult to navigate the system and to provide integrated, appropriate care.

A state-wide review of existing funded programs, such as the Mental Health Pathways, is required. Often homelessness state funded programs are not periodically reviewed and adapted to meet the contemporary needs.

7. Focus on supporting vulnerable groups

7.1. Aboriginal people

Aboriginal people account for up to 10 per cent of all specialist homeless service users. This is by far the highest and fastest growing rate of homeless assistance sought by Aboriginal people of the Australian states.[17]

Solution:

It is essential to address specific needs of Aboriginal people, their consideration of self-determination and housing familial needs, division of clans and hierarchical status. Take into account cultural needs of extended families and adjust housing requirements to meet these needs. Government must be informed of appropriate cultural housing needs of Aboriginal community, including future and current demands and plan accordingly.

In addition, housing and long-term specialist support services required to be sitting within the community.

7.2. Women

More than 60% of people who seek help from homelessness are women. Family violence is the leading reason women become homeless. 38% of people experiencing homelessness indicate family violence is the reason for their homelessness.[18]

Women in rural and remote areas have less access to assistance from services, family, friends and police, placing them more at risk of homelessness or insecure housing. Financial supports like rent assistance and Newstart are not sufficient for women and children to access a lot of housing support options and to be secure in their housing options—and stay in their local areas. For a lot of women to get secure housing they are having to leave their communities, their friends, and their work—and there is still no guarantee that that housing will be secure either. Private rental is often out of their reach if they are receiving pensions and benefits as well. Also need to address that in small communities women and children will need to leave the area to maintain distance form their abuser.

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[17] AHURI 2018
[18] AIHW 2018

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There are insufficient safe housing options for women and children experiencing family violence in Gippsland. This places women and children at ongoing risk from either choosing to remain in the violent home or unsafe housing options or, again, ending up in a system where they are waiting for some form of secure housing, which again may mean or result in them leaving their local communities.

Solution:

Government's commitment to increase funding for supported family violence crisis accommodation, social housing and affordable long-term housing is essential. Safe and secure housing empowers women to escape family violence and re-build their lives.

Quantum recommends that the Victorian Government ensures that Flexible Support Packages continue as an ongoing key component of the family violence response system in Victoria.

7.3. Children and young people

Children and young people are one of the largest groups experiencing homelessness.[19] In Gippsland one in five people under 18 years of age present as homeless, however youth refuges in Morwell and Bairnsdale have a limited capacity to meet the demand for service.

In addition, since 2013 the number of Newstart recipients seeking housing assistance has increased by 75%, outplacing the growth of the number of people receiving Newstart in the same period by 28%.[20] Only 2 rental properties in Australia would be affordable for a single person on Newstart[21] leaving young people most vulnerable in our community.

Solution:

Quantum strongly advocates for more employment options and more support to get young people off Newstart. There should be a stronger focus on access to employment and sufficient income. We believe that there is more work required by local job providers to invest in and sustain an innovative approach to supporting jobseekers to secure regular ongoing employment to increase their income and reduce their reliance on government-funded income.

Quantum believes that investing in alternative education methods that support young people who may not have 'fitted' into traditional school systems should be a priority. More support for Learn Local job preparation and educational programs that are focused on disadvantages

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[19] https://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au/sites/homelessnessaus/files/2017-07/Homelessness_and_Children.pdf.
[20] Homelessness Australia.
[21] Anglicare rental affordability index, 2019.

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or disenfranchised youth and that work in conjunction with support services providers is needed.

Quantum commends 'Youth Foyers' which provide proven pathways for young people and incorporate education, counselling, living skills and other support that leads to employment, independence and rewarding adult lives. It is essential to expand youth foyers in order to reduce the number of young people cycling through housing and homelessness systems, increase the number of people completing education and increase the number of young people who are productively employed.

In addition, it is crucial for the Victorian Government to advocate to raise the rate of Newstart and related payments. The Australian Council of Social Service, according to the analysis of the wage index between 2016 and 2018, estimated necessary $95 boost to the $279.50 weekly payment.

Lastly, state-wide DHHS review of youth refuges resulted in acknowledgement that service providers are doing more than they are funded to deliver. There is an urgent need to fund services appropriately to truly start working towards ending homelessness. We also need an extended support periods of at least 26 weeks for youth refugees to allow for skill development, community connections and a sense of safety and stability to support young people to successfully transition to adolescence.