

Meeting the Needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women and Children Who Experience Family Violence-related Homelessness

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Refuges are a critical component of the family violence service sector because they provide women and children with a safe place to escape family violence and rebuild their lives in a supportive environment. Refuges work best when, in addition to ensuring immediate safety, they promote individual and familial empowerment through participation in community, and through educational and economic opportunities.¹

The impacts of family violence are deeply felt within Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are twice as likely to be victims of domestic violence and 35 times more likely to be hospitalized as a result of domestic violence.² A review of Aboriginal children in care in Victoria found that of 980 young people, 88 per cent had been exposed to family violence.³ Aboriginal women and children are more likely to experience family violence-related homelessness. One quarter (25 per cent) of clients who presented to a Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) funded organisation in 2016–17 were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who had fled or were wanting to flee from violence.⁴

The Aboriginal Women's Refuge Movement

While the fight for the establishment of an Aboriginal women's refuge occurred contemporaneously with a broader Victorian refuge movement, Aboriginal women were clear about the importance of community-based, culturally-safe women's services distinct from the wider feminist movement.⁵ The Aboriginal Women's Refuge Committee (AWRC) was established in 1976 to lobby for government funding to establish an official refuge that would respond to

'their own needs'.⁶ According to a 1979 article published in *Vashti's Voice*, a feminist newspaper, the AWRC was advocating for a refuge in which:

..other categories of Aboriginal women in need apart from those getting away from male violence will be housed. For example, the shelter will not turn away Aboriginal women leaving Fairlea⁷ with no place to go, as the women know well that after Fairlea many are exploited in the hotels of St. Kilda and Fitzroy.⁸

This early recognition of the links between broader socio-economic disadvantage, homelessness and violence among Aboriginal women speaks to a holistic understanding of the issue held by the AWRC and the Aboriginal community. The views taken by Aboriginal women were at odds with dominant understandings of family violence held at the time, which were centred on violence occurring within the home in the context of marital relationships.⁹

Despite ideological differences, the Victorian Women's Refuge Movement did publicly pledge its support for the AWRC and its goal of a refuge designed specifically for Aboriginal women, pointing to the racism faced by Aboriginal women in mainstream refuge accommodations.¹⁰ However, racism was not the only reason that Aboriginal women were advocating for their own refuge. In an interview she gave to the *Herald* paper in 1979, Auntie Joyce Johnson, a founding member of Elizabeth Hoffman House,¹¹ stated that the AWRC was determined to 'care for their own people', and needed an accommodation that allowed for longer stays due to the chronic homelessness many Aboriginal

women in Victoria experienced.¹² Furthermore, random acts of violence against Aboriginal women were common in public places and institutions and the AWRC did not want to restrict refuge access to women who had experienced domestic violence. Four decades later, we continue to routinely see family violence driven homelessness as one of the major issues facing Aboriginal women and children.

The Future of Women's Refuges

It is unsurprising that homelessness as a result of family violence remains one of the key drivers of demand for access to refuge. Refuges will continue to play a vital role because the availability of safe, long-term housing continues to be a major challenge for women and children. While addressing the underlying social, economic and gender inequalities that drive family violence through prevention is a vital element of policy, improving crisis services and removing barriers to refuge entry and exit remains critical. The service sector is rapidly evolving, particularly in the wake of the Royal Commission into Family Violence and greater community awareness is also leading to an increase in reporting. This places further constraints on services working in this space.¹³

In 2014, Elizabeth Morgan House (EMH) established its core and cluster style refuge after operating a communal refuge facility for over 25 years. We believe that this model is the way forward because women and children are able to live more independently and still have access to the supports they need. The Refuge is staffed 24 hours a day by support staff, and case managers are available during business hours. The accessibility of support is crucial.



"Collage" work by 14 year old girl expressing her love of nature and feelings of peace

Our focus is on what women want and need. Refuges can offer a therapeutic and supportive environment, where women have time to rest and think, while knowing that their children are safe.¹⁴

Although refuges may not be the appropriate pathway for all clients, they are especially important for women and children who are found to be at imminent risk of harm.

The current alternative finds many women staying in hotels while they await access to refuges or other forms of supported accommodation. The hotels in which women and children are placed are usually far away from their supportive networks, public transport and other resources.

Specialist family violence services are funded by catchment area, if women are moved out of our catchment area, our service and many other crucial support services are unable to continue to support them, which results in a break in the continuity of care. While in some cases the crisis stay in hotel accommodation is necessary to ensure safety, the women we work with often describe hotel stays as lonely and isolating.

Constantly moving does not provide much needed stability for women and children who have experienced significant trauma. Repeated moves interrupt children's education which places their development at risk.

Accessing health care, including regular check-ups and ensuring compliance with immunisations becomes more challenging.

The hotels rooms are not self-contained, and families are required to make do without kitchen facilities. The hotels are often used by other crisis accommodation services which support individuals with complex mental health and substance misuse challenges. In addition, perpetrators who are unable to return home due to safety notices or intervention orders are often accommodated in the same hotels as women fleeing violent homes.

Women tell us that they are sometimes intimidated or victimized by other hotel guests, which may result in them believing that returning to the perpetrator is a safer option.

Such forms of temporary accommodation are not congruent with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander approaches to practice with women and children who have experienced family violence because there is a lack of direct contact between women and the service.

This impedes opportunities to build a relationship of trust between workers and women and children. Key to our approach is the establishment of trust and mutual understanding between families and refuge workers.

EMH has developed an intersectional practice model that responds to each woman's lived reality. We have a wrap-around and holistic model of care where, in addition to safety concerns, we address the social, emotional and economic impacts of family violence.

We work with women who experience multiple, overlapping forms of adversity. To achieve this, EMH has built strong working relationships with other services that ensure quick and culturally appropriate responses. We work in close partnership with schools and childcare providers, community health and legal services, housing providers, and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to achieve positive outcomes for women. The goal is to work in collaboration with women to create a case plan that has achievable outcomes. We believe that seeing change creates a momentum which allows women and children to move forward in a positive way.

Endnotes

1. Victoria State Government 2017, *Family Violence Rolling Action Plan 2017–2020*, Victoria State Government, Melbourne.
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3. Commission for Children and Young People 2016, *Always Was, Always Will Be Koori Children: Systemic Inquiry into Services Provided to Aboriginal Children and Young People in Out of Home Care in Victoria*, Commission for Children and Young People, Melbourne.
4. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2018, *Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report 2016–17*, AIHW, Melbourne.
5. Theobald J 2015, 'The Beginnings of the Victorian Refuge Movement: Difference, Equality and Protectionism, 1974–1979', *Feminist Review*, vol. 52, no. 1, p. 1–26.
6. Vashti's Voice 1979, 'Aboriginal Women Fight for a Refuge', *Vashti's Voice*, vol. 25, p. 29.
7. Ibid.
8. Theobald J 2014, 'Women's Refuges and the State in Victoria, Australia: A Campaign for Secrecy of Address', *Women's History Review*, vol. 23, no. 1, p. 60–81.
9. Vashti's Voice 1979, 'Aboriginal Women Fight for a Refuge', *Vashti's Voice*, vol. 25, p. 29.
10. *The Herald* 1979, 'Women Seek Refuge', *The Herald*, p. 29.
11. Royal Commission into Family Violence 2016, *Summary and Recommendations*, Victoria Government, Melbourne.
12. Australian's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety 2017, *Women's Specialist Domestic and Family Violence Services: Their Responses and Practices With and For Aboriginal Women: Key Findings and Future Directions*, University of New England, Armidale.
13. Royal Commission into Family Violence 2016, op cit.
14. Australian's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety 2017, op cit.