

Aboriginal parents face having children removed due to Victoria's chronic lack of social housing

JIM MALO  REPORTER | FEB 15, 2020

A dramatic shortage of social housing in Victoria is being blamed for contributing to the high rate of Aboriginal children being taken from their families, often in cases of domestic violence.

Community groups want the government to ramp up its efforts in building social housing and prevent unnecessary removals of Aboriginal children.

Aboriginal woman Cat* is homeless because she ran away from her abusive ex-partner, but the near-impossible task of finding a home has her wondering if it's worth



more out of there, I just got to put up with getting choked out by him, out loud, half-joking. She recently regained custody of her daughter who was living with her birth father.

"If I had a house everything would be all right."

If she doesn't find a place soon, she risks losing her daughter to Child Protection, just one of the government agencies competing for her attention while she tries to find a safe place to live.

She's not alone: Aboriginal children are 10 times more likely to be taken from their families than other children, and 88 per cent of Aboriginal children taken come from family violence situations, according to state government and university-supported studies.

Victoria's ongoing shortage of social housing has made it virtually impossible for mothers fleeing domestic violence to provide a stable home, one of the criteria on which Child Protection can apply to have children removed.

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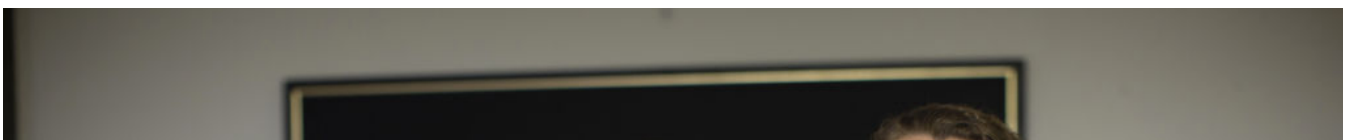
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The Council to Homeless Persons wants 600 social housing properties a year to be given to Aboriginal community groups to manage to help alleviate the issue.

Acting chief executive Kate Colvin said taking Aboriginal children from their parents because the government wasn't providing enough low-cost housing was unfair.

"The question is not the quality of parenting, it's the instability of the housing," she said. "Surely it should be up to the government to provide housing and not remove children."





Kellyanne Andy (L) and Jo Doherty from Elizabeth Morgan House. Photo: Stephen McKenzie

Aboriginal-controlled Elizabeth Morgan House provides crisis accommodation for Indigenous women fleeing abusive partners. Chief executive Kellyanne Andy said the lack of available housing and resulting removals was systemic.

It would be particularly acute in the wake of the bushfires, as housing disaster victims took precedence over all other cases, she said.

“Women will stay in our crisis refuge a lot longer because they will have no options for exiting,” Ms Andy said. “It depends on how long the bushfires go on, how long the floods go and how many people are actually affected by it.

“It could be at least 12 months before we can see people moving around again.”

Research from UNSW Scientia fellow Kyllie Cripps late last year showed Indigenous women were much more likely to have children taken by the government, and the way the rigid manner with which cases were handled caused more emotional harm

“Many of the women interviewed said they did everything child protection asked of us, but the only thing we can’t get is the housing and now we can’t get our kids back,” Dr Cripps said. “If they have a time limit of two years for out of home care [before they’re taken], and the wait list for social housing is eight years long, or even two years long, you won’t get your kids back.”

A Victorian government spokesperson said when a court determines an Aboriginal child cannot live with their family, the government works to ensure their support is



“We’ve also invested \$70 million in redeveloping and building new family violence refuges across the state, including two new Aboriginal specific refuges – meaning an additional 60 families will be able to recover in a secure environment,” the spokesperson said.

**Name changed to protect her identity.*

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