

VICTORIA PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION 2026-2027



WOMEN'S
COMMUNITY
SHELTERS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Women's Community Shelters acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land and waters.

We pay our deepest respects to Elders past and present and extend that respect to all First Nations peoples today.

We honour their strength, resilience, and enduring wisdom, recognising the deep and sacred connections to land, waters, and community connections that have existed for tens of thousands of years and continue to be unbroken.

In this spirit, Women's Community Shelters stands in solidarity with First Nations communities, honouring the courage and dignity of those who not only stand up and say No to Violence but who take action to challenge it, holding perpetrators accountable.

We also pay our deepest respects to the mothers, children, sisters, cousins, and loved ones who have lost their lives at the hands of perpetrators. We honour their memory, holding them in our hearts as we continue our collective fight for justice and change.

We commit to working alongside First Nations peoples and all communities in creating a future where safety, dignity, and respect are a reality for all.

We will continue to advocate for change so that those emerging may never need to question their safety, can live a life free from fear and flourish. We commit to working alongside First Nations peoples and all communities in creating a future where safety, dignity, and respect are a reality for all.

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Honouring Victim Survivors

Women's Community Shelters honours the courage and lived experience of women, children and families who have survived domestic and family violence.

Their voices shape and strengthen the way we design services, advocate for reform, and respond to community needs.

We remember those whose lives have been lost to violence and recognise the enduring harm this abuse places on families, communities and future generations.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women's Community Shelters (WCS) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Victorian Government's 2026–27 State Budget pre-budget consultation.

We acknowledge and commend the Victorian Government's continued commitment to supporting women, children and families. We also recognise the essential role of collaboration between Government, community and philanthropy in responding to domestic and family violence (DFV) and homelessness. This partnership approach enables organisations like WCS to advance our mission of providing safe, secure and sustainable housing pathways for women and children.

Victoria remains at a critical pressure point for DFV and homelessness. Family violence is the leading cause of homelessness for women and children in Victoria, yet crisis accommodation supply continues to fall well short of demand. Women are being turned away daily due to lack of safe beds, while services are increasingly reliant on high-cost, and unsafe motel accommodation. Refuges are operating at full capacity, and “a significant number of households are waiting in motels for a refuge place” (Safe and Equal, 2025). Women are being left without safe alternatives, while services report widespread dissatisfaction with the “lack of accommodation options” and the “inability to provide housing.”

Our submission presents three priority investment areas that align and advance on the NSW priorities consistent with the core purpose, mission and service delivery expertise of WCS.

Our work together equally contributes to the delivery of the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children (2022–2032), by expanding evidence-based crisis and prevention interventions in local communities.

Our priority investment areas outline the evidence, proposed initiatives and budget requests required to respond to the urgent DFV and homelessness crisis facing Victorian women and children. These investments will deliver immediate impact while reducing long-term costs by preventing violence, addressing disadvantage and strengthening family, wellbeing and economic outcomes.

This submission is grounded in evidence-based research, insights from victim-survivors, operational data from our shelter and housing network, and the expertise of our philanthropic, Government and community partners. It reflects the complex intersections of housing, health, justice and social support, and proposes integrated, place-based solutions that deliver safety, stability and long-term recovery.

We thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to inform the priorities and shape the budget of the Victorian Government's 2026-2027 Budget.

WCS RECOMMENDATIONS

Priority 1: Operational Funding

Expand and sustain four dedicated, safe and secure shelters as the core pathway for women and children escaping DFV. This priority focuses on securing ongoing, State Government operational funding to ensure 24/7 crisis capacity, specialist staffing, children's support, case management and trauma-informed service delivery across new shelters.

Priority 2: Capital Investment - Hume Crisis Accommodation

'Shovel-Ready' New Build

Priority 3: Prevention - Walk The Talk Program

Invest in early prevention through the continued expansion of the Walk the Talk (WTT) Program to build awareness, shift attitudes and drive meaningful community action. This priority ensures sustained funding to grow youth-led prevention, school-based education and community engagement to stop violence before it starts.

EXAMPLES OF WCS SHELTERS AND HOUSING PROJECTS IN NSW

Glenfield



Parramatta



Penrith



Revesby



ABOUT US

WCS works with communities to provide accommodation, safety and support for women and their children impacted by DFV and at risk or experiencing homelessness.

Since opening our doors in 2013, WCS has supported more than 8,400 women and children escaping violence and homelessness. Today, our network delivers up to 130,000 safe bed nights each year across Australia. As a registered Community Housing Provider in NSW and a national crisis accommodation provider, we support women of all ages and at every stage of their journey to safety, alongside their children. We believe safe beds, save lives.

We empower communities and take action to:

- recognise and address early warning signs to stop violence before it takes root
- provide immediate crisis support, creating safe havens and sustainable housing solutions
- deliver transformative education programs and lead strategic systems advocacy
- build local capacity and leadership, while incubating and leading innovative responses.

WCS delivers measurable safety and housing outcomes for women and children through a proven, flexible, and community-driven social franchise model adapted across jurisdictions. As an innovative partner to the NSW Government, Women's Community Shelters delivers a proven, scalable frontline model that ensures women and children at risk of violence or homelessness can access immediate safety alongside pathways to long-term stability.

The urgency of this work cannot be overstated: without timely access to housing and support, women and children face escalating risks to their safety, wellbeing and security. WCS offers exceptional value for money, leveraging Government investment through philanthropy, volunteerism, and community partnerships to multiply social impact per dollar spent.

As a trusted partner with demonstrated results, WCS stands with the specialised skills, expertise and experience to expand its network and prevention programs to ensure every woman and child flourish and live free from abuse.



HOW WE WORK

WCS delivers safe, specialist accommodation and coordinated support across the full housing continuum through its nationally proven social franchise model, combining locally led community governance with professional oversight to ensure accountability, sustainability and evidence-based practice.

Funded through a tripartite partnership of philanthropy, industry, Government and community, WCS maximises public investment while delivering measurable safety, recovery and housing outcomes for women and children. As we expand into Victoria, WCS brings a ready-to-deploy, community-led model that provides immediate safety and clear pathways to long-term housing stability.

With a strong track record in NSW and growing momentum in Victoria, WCS delivers exceptional value for money, leveraging Government investment through volunteers, philanthropy and community partnerships so more women and children can rebuild their lives and live free from violence.

WCS offers the Victorian Government a cost-effective investment to expand crisis accommodation and prevention capacity for women and children experiencing DFV. The WCS community-led social franchise model consistently delivers lower per-bed operating costs than motel based crisis responses, while producing stronger safety, housing and recovery outcomes.

Investment through WCS delivers clear downstream savings by reducing:

- emergency motel expenditure
- repeat police call-outs and court involvement
- hospital presentations and mental health escalation
- long-term homelessness and child protection intervention.

Every dollar of Victorian Government investment is multiplied through philanthropy, local Government contribution, business partnerships and volunteer leadership, stretching public funding further while building permanent, community-owned infrastructure. This represents a capital-efficient, scalable response that converts short-term crisis expenditure into long term social and fiscal return.

WCS provides a measurable return on investment through:

- reduced reliance on high-cost emergency accommodation
- improved housing stability and economic participation for women
- intergenerational cost avoidance through early intervention and prevention
- demonstrable social return across health, justice and homelessness systems.

WHAT WE ARE DELIVERING

WCS delivers an integrated continuum of crisis accommodation, housing and prevention through a proven, community-led model. Our work spans immediate safety, recovery-focused housing and long-term prevention.

▲ Crisis Shelters

Through our innovative social franchise model, WCS has partnered with local communities to establish and operate 12 specialist crisis shelters. These shelters provide safe, trauma-informed accommodation alongside comprehensive wrap-around case management and support services, including:

- health and wellbeing support
- counselling and therapeutic care
- legal and court support
- children's services
- connections to education, training and employment.

This integrated response ensures women and children are supported not only to escape violence, but to stabilise and rebuild their lives.

▲ Transitional Housing

WCS operates an innovative 'meanwhile-use' transitional housing program, partnering with developers, Government and private landlords to repurpose vacant properties into immediate housing for women who have exited crisis but are waiting for permanent, affordable homes. We currently operate four large-scale transitional homes for women aged 55+, now recognised as the fastest-growing cohort of homelessness in Australia.

These homes deliver:

- safe, self-contained accommodation
- onsite support and specialist case management (minimum four days per week)
- pathways into long-term housing and independence.

▲ Social and Affordable Housing

WCS is actively creating new social and affordable housing specifically for women and their children who have experienced DFV. These homes provide long-term, secure accommodation with tailored case management to support trauma recovery, parenting stability, economic participation and long-term independence.

▲ Primary Prevention

WCS delivers WTT, a nationally recognised, evidence-based prevention program that promotes respectful, healthy relationships and empowers young people to become community change-makers. The program has reached more than 22,000 students nationwide.

We also deliver:

- WTT Corporate, workplace education for early intervention and cultural change
- Allies in Action, a corporate leadership and team-building program to strengthen community prevention responses.

Together, these programs build community awareness, reduce stigma, and help stop violence before it starts.



THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE AND EMERGING TRENDS

Nationally, DFV remains the single leading cause of homelessness for women and children. On any given night, more than 54,000 women are homeless across Australia, with violence cited as the primary driver (ABS Census 2021). Specialist homelessness services are under constant strain, with rising numbers of women and children presenting without being able to access assistance.

Victoria: Escalating Demand and System Pressure

In Victoria, the scale and intensity of family violence remain stark. Police attend thousands of family violence incidents each month, with year-on-year increases continuing across many regions. Since the full rollout of The Orange Door in 2022, demand for specialist family violence services has surged reflecting both increased community confidence to seek help and the growing prevalence and complexity of violence.

Specialist family violence services report that demand is now consistently outstripping capacity. Waitlists for case management, refuge and therapeutic support have become routine. Services are increasingly forced to triage only the highest-risk cases, leaving many victim survivors waiting weeks for assistance while their risk escalates. Workforce shortages, sustained overtime, high vacancy rates and rising burnout are further undermining service stability and frontline response capacity.

Housing Crisis Deepens Risk

This crisis is unfolding within an acute housing and cost-of-living emergency, making it harder and more dangerous for women and children to leave violence. Long social housing waitlists, priority applicants waiting many months for an offer, and a chronic shortage of affordable private rentals across metropolitan and regional Victoria have forced services to rely heavily on motels and other unsuitable short-term accommodation. This is unsafe, destabilising for children, and financially unsustainable.

The average wait time for Victorians experiencing homelessness now exceeds 19.8 months (Council to Homeless Persons, 2023–24), up sharply from just 11 months three years earlier. The cost to Government for motel accommodation is approximately \$220–\$270 per night per family — delivering poor safety outcomes at extremely high public expense.

For many women, the choice is now between staying with a violent partner or becoming homeless, often with the added fear of child removal if stable housing cannot be secured. These risks are particularly acute for Aboriginal families, who are already disproportionately impacted by family violence, homelessness and child protection involvement as a result of colonisation and ongoing systemic inequity.

Victorian Pressure Points

The impact is particularly stark in key growth and high-demand regions:

- Mornington Peninsula: Now Victoria's highest rough sleeping hotspots, with more than 350 women couch surfing, sleeping in cars or rough sleeping each night, and no crisis refuge between Frankston and Morwell.
- Hume: More than 3,600 family violence incidents were recorded in 2023–24, making it one of the highest-incidence LGAs in Victoria, yet there is still no dedicated women's shelter—forcing women and children to leave their communities, schools and support networks to find safety.
- Barwon Region: A fast-growing regional corridor experiencing rising family violence and homelessness presentations, with limited local crisis refuge capacity, leaving many women and children without access to immediate, place-based safety.
- West Melbourne: Rapid population growth, housing stress and entrenched disadvantage are placing intense pressure on specialist family violence and homelessness services, with crisis accommodation demand consistently exceeding supply.

Imminent Funding Cliff

Without urgent action in the 2026–27 Victorian State Budget, nearly \$118 million in core family violence response and prevention funding is due to lapse at the end of 2025–26, alongside key housing and safe at home programs.

If this funding is not made ongoing and strengthened in line with demand, Victoria faces:

- The loss of critical specialist roles and refuge operations
- Longer wait times and reduced access to safety for thousands of victim survivors
- Increased reliance on unsafe and costly motel accommodation
- Escalating pressure on policing, courts, hospitals and homelessness services as violence becomes more complex and costly to respond to.

The Consequence of Inaction

The Victorian shelter and refuge system is already overwhelmed, with women and children fleeing violence regularly placed in inadequate and unsafe motel accommodation.

Without immediate capital and operational investment in the Mornington Peninsula, Hume, Barwon and West Melbourne, women and children will continue to be:

- turned away from safety
- forced into unsafe motel accommodation
- displaced far from family, schools and support networks
- exposed to escalating risk of serious harm and repeat violence.

Emerging Trends Identified by WCS in the last 12 Months

- One in two women who approach crisis accommodation are turned away every day, primarily due to the lack of beds available to provide safety and support
- One in five of our clients are First Nations
- The primary reason women and children present to WCS is DFV, accounting for 67% of our clients. This represents an increase of 4% in the last 12 months
- The length of stay in our crisis shelters has increased by an average of two weeks, to a total of 11 weeks
- A total of 63% of clients in WCS shelter were supported into safe and secure housing, this is an increase of 10% from the last financial year
- A total of 87% of WCS clients in transitional accommodation were supported into safe and secure housing.

WCS is taking tremendous strides to support the community through an increase in our nights of safety and more options to safely exit our clients into safe, secure and long-term housing. However, our resources are finite, and the number of people we cannot assist continues to grow, highlighting that it is more important than ever to build our network and services.

Our response is a continued investment in expansion, education, prevention, as well as expanding our network of communities equipped to support those who need it – and to this end we seek Government's support



WCS DETAILED BUDGET PRIORITY PROPOSALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Priority 1: Operational Funding

Expand and sustain four crisis shelters across Victoria, each housing up to five women with or without children in crisis, with ongoing Outreach Program support as women and families transition to permanent housing. These shelters will service key regions of need; the Mornington Peninsula, Hume, Barwon region, and West Melbourne (with Barwon and West Melbourne newly identified as priority service gaps) requiring dedicated crisis accommodation.

WCS invites the Victorian Government to consider a similar funding model. An investment of \$4 million over four years will establish four new community-led crisis shelters—on the Mornington Peninsula, in Hume, Barwon, and Western Melbourne delivering safer, more cost-effective outcomes than continued reliance on motel accommodation.



Cost Modelling and Savings to the Victorian Government (2026–2030)

We estimate the running cost of one shelter in VIC to be \$750K per annum.

Estimated Savings to Government:

By investing \$4 million over four years, the Victorian Government would save approximately \$2 million compared with current motel expenditure (\$6 million). This model delivers not only cost efficiency but also safe, stable housing and long-term outcomes for women and children.

Victorian Sector Costings	Shelter 1 2025	Shelter X 2 2026	Shelter X 3 2027	Shelter X 4 2028	
Operational cost	\$ 750,000	\$ 1,550,000	\$ 2,400,000	\$ 3,300,000	
Contribution from Philanthropy & Community	\$ 375,000	\$ 775,000	\$ 1,200,000	\$ 1,650,000	
Suggested VIC Government Contribution to Operating Cost (50%)	Shelter 1 \$375K	Shelter 1 \$400K Shelter 2 \$375K	Shelter 1 \$425K Shelter 2 \$400K Shelter 3 \$375K	Shelter 1 \$450K Shelter 2 \$425K Shelter 3 \$400K Shelter 4 \$375K	Total (by site) \$1650K \$1200K \$775K \$375K
\$4M	\$ 375,000	\$775 000	\$ 1,200,000	\$ 1,650,000	\$4M
Current expense to VIC Gov Motel Accommodation only (based on 5 families)	\$ 600,000	\$ 1,200,000	\$ 1,800,000	\$ 2,400,000	\$6M

WCS calls for recurrent State Government operational funding of \$6 million per annum (index-linked) to:

- Provide sustainable 24/7 operational funding for existing and emerging Victorian WCS-affiliated shelters
- Fund specialist DFV practitioners, children's case managers, case managers and after-hours crisis response
- Support integrated wrap-around service delivery including safety planning, housing pathways, legal connection and wellbeing supports
- Strengthen workforce wellbeing, governance oversight and clinical supervision across the Victorian network.

Outcome:

- 29,200 nights of safety for women and children who would otherwise be in motels, cars, unsafe homes or rough sleeping for four shelters per year
- Stable, high-quality crisis services delivering consistent safety, recovery and housing outcomes for Victorian women and children
- Reduced motel use, reduced police call-outs, reduced repeat homelessness and DFV re-presentations.

Priority 2 - Capital Investment (Shovel-Ready): \$2.9 million (one-off)

One off capital investment of \$2.9 million to deliver a new, purpose-built, shovel-ready crisis accommodation facility in Hume for women and children escaping domestic and family violence.

This project is ready to proceed, with architectural plans already developed, site investigations advanced and local partnerships established, enabling immediate progression to construction subject to funding.

This investment will:

- Deliver a new purpose-built crisis accommodation facility designed to trauma-informed, child-safe and culturally responsive standards
- Provide immediate and long-term increases in safe-bed capacity within one of Victoria's highest-demand LGAs
- Reduce reliance on unsafe, unsuitable and high-cost motel accommodation
- Enable women and children to remain safely connected to their local schools, services and community networks
- Strengthen the end-to-end housing pathway from crisis to recovery and permanent housing.

Outcomes

- 7,300 nights of safety for women and children who would otherwise be in motels, cars, unsafe homes or rough sleeping for four shelters per year
- A fully constructed, community-embedded crisis accommodation facility delivering immediate life-saving infrastructure in Hume
- Increased access to safe, secure crisis accommodation for women and children who currently have no local shelter option
- Reduced police call-outs, reduced repeat homelessness and reduced DFV re-presentations driven by earlier access to safety
- Long-term cost avoidance across health, justice, child protection and homelessness system
- Reduced reliance on emergency motel accommodation.

Priority 3: Primary Prevention Investment: \$30,000 per year (recurring for four years)

WCS calls for recurring Victorian Government investment in primary prevention, aligned with Respect Victoria's whole-of-population approach to preventing family violence before it starts. This investment will strengthen school-based prevention and trial a new industry-led initiative to shift attitudes, behaviours and workplace culture, to comprise:

- \$30,000 per year (recurring for four years) to expand WTT across metropolitan, regional and rural Victoria, delivered in partnership with local DFV and youth services to promote respectful relationships, gender equality and bystander action

In Victoria, WTT has been delivered on the Mornington Peninsula, including at Peninsula Grammar and Rosebud Secondary College, demonstrating strong alignment with local community priorities and demand for school-based DFV prevention.

Developed by WCS, WTT partners with secondary schools to help students understand the drivers of family and gender-based violence, build empathy and take meaningful action to support their local community shelter. It connects classroom learning with real-world impact, fostering our next generation of volunteers and encouraging young people to support those most at risk, and to promote respect, equality and safety.

The benefits of WTT extend beyond individual awareness, it builds stronger, safer communities by empowering communities from within. By engaging students, educators, parents and local leaders, the program supports whole-of-community ownership of change and nurtures our next generation of leaders. The program strengthens the connection between young people and local shelters, breaking down stigma and creating a shared understanding of the importance of community responses to family and gender-based violence.

There is an extensive, long-standing evidence base showing that investment in prevention reduces demand on crisis services over time. Expanding WTT offers a cost-effective, evidence-informed approach to prevention. This early intervention helps reduce the likelihood of future family violence incidents and relieves pressure on already overstretched specialist DFV and homelessness systems.

The WTT program is evidence-based with demonstrable intergenerational and community benefits. Ninety-seven per cent of participating students rate the program as very good or excellent, and 100% would recommend it to others. In 2025 alone, students returned over \$293,000 of value to the Australian community through volunteering, goods and donations.

Given the success and results delivered by WTT, WCS is ready to scale the program across Victoria, train more facilitators and deepen partnerships with the education sector. WCS seeks to expand WTT into up to 20 regional and rural Victorian LGAs over the next 12 months, enabling an additional 6,000 students to participate in the year-long program.



MEASURING IMPACT

WCS is committed to maintaining rigorous data collection, outcomes measurement and independent evaluation across its housing continuum and prevention programs.

Transparent performance monitoring ensures the Victorian Government investment is accountable, evidence-based and demonstrably improving safety and wellbeing outcomes for women and children across NSW.

Key performance indicators and outcome measures include:

- Bed nights delivered and occupancy rates – measuring capacity, efficiency and utilisation across the WCS housing continuum
- Proportion of clients successfully transitioned to stable housing – tracking long-term outcomes and pathways to independence
- Client safety, wellbeing and empowerment outcomes – assessed through support evaluation tools that measure changes in safety, confidence and community connection among others
- Program evaluation of WTT – independently assessing attitudinal and behavioural change among participating students, schools, and communities, with evidence of increased understanding of respect, equality and DFV.

Beyond quantitative outputs, WCS captures qualitative impact through client stories, school feedback and community partnerships that demonstrate the broader social return on investment.

Evaluation findings consistently show that WCS programs not only provide immediate safety and stability but also deliver significant preventative and intergenerational benefits.

WCS continues to refine its evaluation frameworks in alignment with the Victorian Government's outcomes measurement priorities, ensuring that every public dollar invested contributes to safer communities to form stronger families and lasting change.

CONCLUSION

With the Victorian Government's commitment and investment, as outlined in this submission, Victoria has a powerful opportunity to move beyond crisis response and into lasting prevention and recovery. This funding will not only provide immediate safety for women and children fleeing violence, it will help break cycles of abuse, reduce long-term homelessness, and strengthen the resilience of entire communities. The return on this investment is profound: safer families, stronger communities, and genuine intergenerational change.

This investment makes strong economic and social sense for Victoria. It directly addresses a critical system gap, with family violence remaining the leading cause of homelessness for women and children and crisis beds in critically short supply. It leverages significant non-government funding through Women's Community Shelters' philanthropy, corporate partnerships and community fundraising, stretching every public dollar further. It builds local capacity and community ownership through locally governed volunteer boards, supported by WCS. And it reduces downstream costs by easing pressure on police, hospitals, courts, motels and the homelessness system.

With Government partnership, Victoria will deliver a safer, more efficient and more humane response to family violence, one that protects women and children today while building stronger communities for generations to come.

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