

Southern Homelessness Services Network

Consumer Survey Report 2019

*Report on the inaugural 2019
SHSN Member Consumer Survey*

March 2020



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About the Southern Homelessness Services Network

The **Vision** of the Southern Homelessness Services Network (SHSN) is an end to homelessness in Southern Region of Melbourne (comprising Bayside-Peninsula and Southern Melbourne Department of Human Services areas).

The **Mission** of the “Victorian Homelessness Networks is to facilitate, inform and support regional homelessness services and stakeholders to work together to co-ordinate services to people who are experiencing or who are at risk of homelessness.”

The Network comprises all funded Specialist Homelessness Services in the Southern Region including services providing crisis, transitional, long term, family violence and youth support and accommodation. The Network also supports related services working in homelessness.

The key strategic SHSN objectives are:

1. To promote and support innovation, knowledge sharing and expertise in the best interests of consumers.
2. To foster relationships and collaboration between service providers to ensure timely, coordinated and effective responses.
3. To act as a conduit between the Department of Health and Human Services and the regional service sector homelessness related data, issues and trends to inform policy.
4. Working together to end homelessness.

The SHSN would like to thank Cael Hannah, student intern from Monash University Public Policy Masters Program, for preparing this report.

Southern Homelessness Services Network Member Agencies

Launch Housing www.launchhousing.org.au

Wayss www.wayss.org.au

Sacred Heart Mission www.sacredheartmission.org

Star Health www.starhealth.org.au

Melbourne City Mission www.melbournecitymission.org.au

South Port Community Housing www.spchg.org.au

Whitelion www.whitelion.asn.au

Thorne Harbour Health www.thorneharbour.org

The Salvation Army Homelessness and Youth (South) www.salvationarmy.org.au

Fusion www.fusion.org.au

Emerge www.emergesupport.org.au

Windermere www.windermere.org.au

South East Community Links www.secl.org.au

Neami National www.neaminational.org.au

Moira www.moira.org.au

VincentCare www.vincentcare.org.au

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1. Introduction

The Southern Homelessness Services Network (SHSN) and its member agencies has made consumer participation and engagement a key priority in its overall aim to end homelessness as demonstrated by the development of the SHSN Consumer Participation Guide in 2019. The purpose of the Guide is to -

Demonstrate the commitment of the SHSN and member agencies to consumer participation and to show the strong value we place on involving consumers in all aspects of our work as people with lived experience and expertise in homelessness (2019:2).

A key commitment of the SHSN in the Guide is to conduct a consumer survey every two years. The SHSN Consumer Survey fits within the practice principles of the Consumer Participation Guide by seeking valued feedback from consumers that contribute to the work of the SHSN and its member agencies. Importantly, consumers are self-determined in their level of feedback and engagement with SHSN and member agencies, with access to the service system not being affected in any way.

A SHSN Consumer Participation Working Group was established with representation from SHSN member agencies and a member of the Launch Housing Lived Experience Advisory Group (LEAG). The LEAG member played an important role in advising the Consumer Participation Working Group from the consumer perspective. The Working Group guided the development and implementation of the SHSN Consumer Participation Survey. This survey is modelled on the survey of our colleague networks - the North and West Homelessness Networks – Annual Consumer Surveys. The North West annual survey has been running since 2012.

This report describes the methodology, the key findings (see section 2) and learnings (section 3) from the data of the SHSN 2019 Consumer Survey and presents conclusions from the survey for the SHSN's continuing work on consumer participation.

1.1 Methodology

The SHSN sought and obtained ethics approval by the Anglicare Victoria Research Ethics Committee (AVREC) for the proposed survey methodology. The SHSN wrote and shared a participant information sheet with all the necessary information for consumer participants and an information sheet for member staff implementing the survey. Following this, member agencies recruited participants by using the SHSN participation sheet. Each member agency was asked to recruit and survey five clients from each funded Specialist Homelessness Service (SHS) program. For example, if a member agency had three SHS programs, they were asked to recruit 15 participants. Agencies were advised to randomly recruit participants rather than targeting any particular type of client.

The SHSN conducted the consumer survey between 14 October and 8 November 2019. 150 surveys were received, 139 of which were completed and 11 were incomplete. These were received from consumers who accessed homelessness service organisations that work in the inner South metropolitan area to the outer Southern suburbs of Melbourne.

2. Key Findings

The key findings shows the relevant information and responses from survey respondents in regard to important areas of homelessness services. These include demographic information, the use of homelessness services and consumer experiences accessing such services and programs. It also includes the types of housing sought after by consumers and the barriers to their preferred housing. The findings in this section are complemented by two case studies drawn from the survey responses - Emmanuel and Belinda (names have been changed to maintain anonymity and privacy).

2.1 Demographic Information

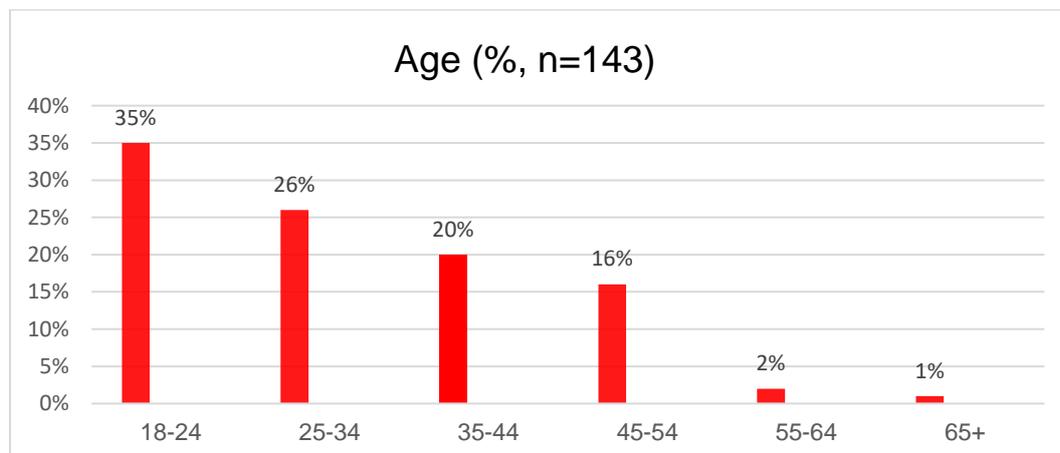
This section outlines the demographic findings from the responses given by survey respondents. The purpose is to show the key demographic information including age, gender and living arrangements, place of birth and the suburbs/towns that feel most like home to survey respondents.

2.1.1 Age, Gender and Sexual Orientation

The demographic makeup of the survey respondents was largely younger people and women who made up the biggest cohorts of survey respondents. Survey respondents who identified as LGBTIQ made up a small proportion of all respondents. 71% of survey respondents identified as female, 28% identified as male with less than 1% identifying as transgender (145 survey responses). Figure 1 below shows younger people were represented more than any other age group in the survey.

- those aged 18-34 combined form a majority of 61% of survey respondents
- respondents aged 35-54 are a significant cohort (36%), however, those aged 55 and above account for a small proportion (3%)
- those aged 35 and over comprised 39%.

Figure 1. Age Breakdown of Survey Respondents

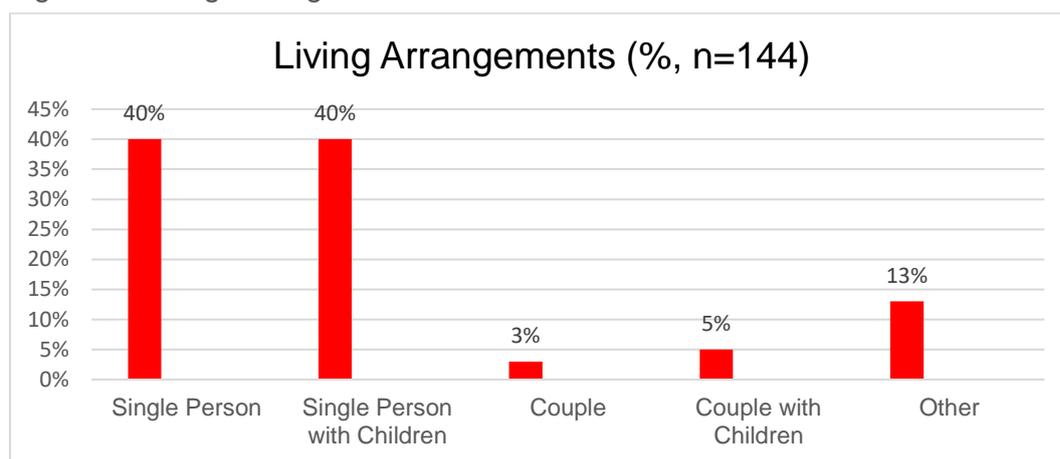


2.1.2 Living Arrangements

Figure 2. shows the living arrangements of survey respondents with the most common type of living arrangement equally split between single person and single person living with dependent children under 18.

- 40% of survey respondents described themselves as a single person
- 40% of survey respondents described themselves as a single parent with dependent children under 18
- 8% of survey respondents described themselves as either a couple with dependent children under 18, or a couple without dependent children

Figure 2. Living Arrangements



2.1.3 Place of Birth

Survey respondents born in Australia were the majority of responses, with only a small proportion of survey respondents identified as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person.

- 67% of survey respondents said their place of birth was Australia (out of a total of 143 responses)
- the second most common place of birth was Africa, (13% of survey respondents)
- 10% of survey respondents identified as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person (out of 144 responses).

2.1.4 Suburb/Town That Feels Most Like Home

Survey respondents were asked which suburb or town felt most like home. The following towns and suburbs were the most common (total of 140 survey responses). The majority of survey respondents said that a location in Victoria felt most like home.

- Dandenong, Frankston, Melbourne CBD, Narre Warren, Pakenham, Cranbourne and St Kilda, were the most common suburbs and towns that felt like home
- the top five local government areas where survey respondents felt most at home were City of Casey, City of Greater Dandenong, Frankston City Council, City of Melbourne and Port Phillip Council
- the three local government areas that accounted for the biggest combined cohort at 44% identified the City of Casey, City of Greater Dandenong and Frankston City Council as most like home.

2.2 Use of Homelessness Services

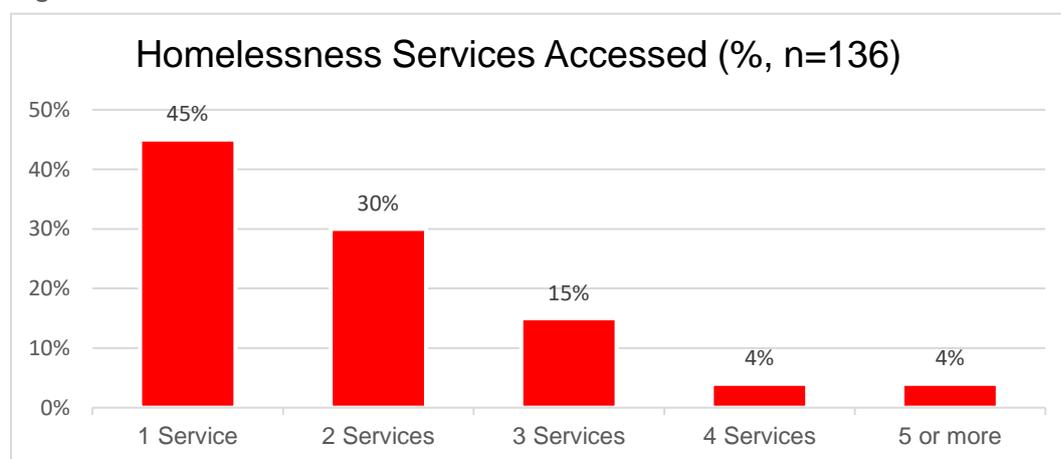
This following section is about the experiences of survey respondents accessing homelessness services, the main issues that brought them to homelessness services, waiting times and their experience repeating information to homelessness services.

2.2.1 Number of Services Accessed in a Year

Figure 3. shows the number of homelessness services accessed by survey respondents in the last twelve months (total of 136 survey responses). Figure 3 shows most survey respondents accessed up to three homelessness services in the last twelve months. Those who accessed four or more homelessness services were a small cohort (8%).

- 90% of survey respondents accessed one to three homelessness services
- 75% of survey respondents accessed one or two homelessness services in the last year
- 45% of survey respondents accessed only one homelessness services in the last year
- less than 10% of survey respondents accessed four or more homelessness services.

Figure 3. Homelessness Services Accessed



2.2.2 Main Issues Bringing Consumers to Homelessness Services

The most common issue that brought survey respondents to a homelessness service was homelessness at 36% (total of 131 survey responses). The next most common issue was family violence at 25%. The list below shows the range of issues other than homelessness and family violence that were identified by survey respondents -

- financial difficulties/rent arrears, income difficulties
- overcrowding, living with friends and safety issues
- looking for stable housing including housing appropriate for families
- property maintenance and tenancy support issues
- physical and Mental Health issues
- life skills such as cooking, cleaning, day to day living in housing.

Below are some quotes from survey respondents describing the issue that brought them to the homelessness service -

Chronic Homelessness. Had an ABI back in 2004 due to drink driving. After getting out of hospital I was imprisoned for a while. As a result, I didn't get any rehabilitation. Things got worse. I lost my job as I'd forget things, my relationship of ten years failed. I eventually got into the wrong company and landed back in prison. That has happened a few times now.

Was in crisis accommodation, previous rooming house with partner but had to leave due to domestic violence from ex-partner...

Becoming homeless due to domestic violence and having no luck getting into private rental again.

Needing help with housing and affordability of meeting needs of my autistic son.

I was living in an overcrowded house that I couldn't stay in any longer.

2.2.3 Addressing Consumer Issues

98% of survey respondents (total of 135 survey responses), answered “yes” when asked if they have been supported in addressing their main issue by the homelessness service they accessed. This is an extremely positive response. However the responses to the following questions described positive and negative experiences with services that does not necessarily reflect their initial answer. Below are quotes from survey responses describing their experience of being supported by homelessness services to address the issue that brought them there -

Very persistent in meeting with us at the start, advocating for us a lot with other services, very helpful and very caring. Helped with linking us in with services that are specific to us.

I have accommodation right now, but even after two years there's still nowhere I can afford. And now I've aged out of the housing I'm in so there's this big push to get out, but if that does happen I'll just be homeless again only with no help to get accommodation.

The process has started but it's going to take some time and in the mean time we have to live day to day to get through and I have three small children to look after including a baby.

My worker helped me and my partner find a private rental that we could afford and helped us with some money towards rent in advance.

We need new ideas, more staff and more education, more events and more positive change. Because I was sent to get a food voucher and clothing voucher but that is only every six months which is enough for the moment but for the moment after I am stuck with what to do.

2.2.4 Consumer Experience of Accessing Homelessness Services

Survey respondents described how the support given to them has helped their life in a profound way. For these consumers, their experience of accessing homelessness services had been very good. Although, survey respondents also described difficulty accessing services; repeating information too many times; not enough resources; and a lack of awareness of what services to access as issues they have faced. Some survey respondents described their experience accessing homelessness services as being pushed from service to service, and having to wait for a long time -

- 56% of survey respondents described having a positive experience accessing homelessness services (total of 122 survey responses)
- 34% of survey respondents described having a negative experience accessing homelessness services
- The remaining 10% of survey respondents described either a mixed experience or did not describe their experience.

Below are quotes from survey respondents describing their experience accessing homelessness services -

I am currently in transitional housing ...[Service provider] in this area is excellent I have a fantastic worker and great support from her. I was so lost and scared before but since have found housing with weekly visits from my worker. I have found a great special school for my 7 year old with autism I feel safe and happy finally. I am very thank full to (Service provider) for all their support.

I found it difficult to present to service initially as I was unsure of the process and it felt intimidating. Difficulty in navigating the system...

It was difficult and confusing for both to the services and I to understand where to begin from, but it turned out they were able to link me with variety of other ways to get me to the right help for me and that saved my life.

Horrible experience. I kept getting bounced around everywhere. One day I spent hours contacting all services and couldn't get anyone to help me.

I originally had no idea that these services even existed and this meant that it took some time for me to receive the help that I needed. I was also told that I could not go into refuge because I did not have any income. As a result I felt as if I was stuck in my situation of family violence. It also took over four months for me to receive any parenting payments...

Case Study 1 - Emmanuel

Emmanuel is a young man aged 18-24, born in Africa. He is a single person and he has sought assistance due to being homeless and relationship breakdown. He had been sleeping in his car prior to accessing his current service. Emmanuel has accessed three homelessness services in the last twelve months, causing him to repeat his information to his frustration. He has now been living in Transitional Housing for over a year. He would like to move into a private rental, although he says money is a barrier for him to access private rental. Emmanuel suggested that people be given a place first for the night instead of turning people away.

Emmanuel said of his experience -

It's [this service has] been helpful in a lot of situations. Helping me out with my school, education.

I don't like telling twice or three times my story. People ask a lot of the same questions but I tell them the simple answer not the whole story because the whole story takes too long.

It helps when you have one worker know you for a long time. I get frustrated saying the same thing over and over again.

For me it was hard as many services didn't have anything to offer me and told me to come back in 2 weeks or 3 weeks...It was really hard really, really tough, I didn't know what refuge was. It was good but it wasn't the best option for me so I had to come up with something else, constantly keep representing and take advantage of every support available... Once I found the right support they would talk to me and they knew me and I told them everything and then I told them about my future goals. And then I got into a different refuge and was able to get some housing.

It could have been easier if ... I didn't have to keep persisting.

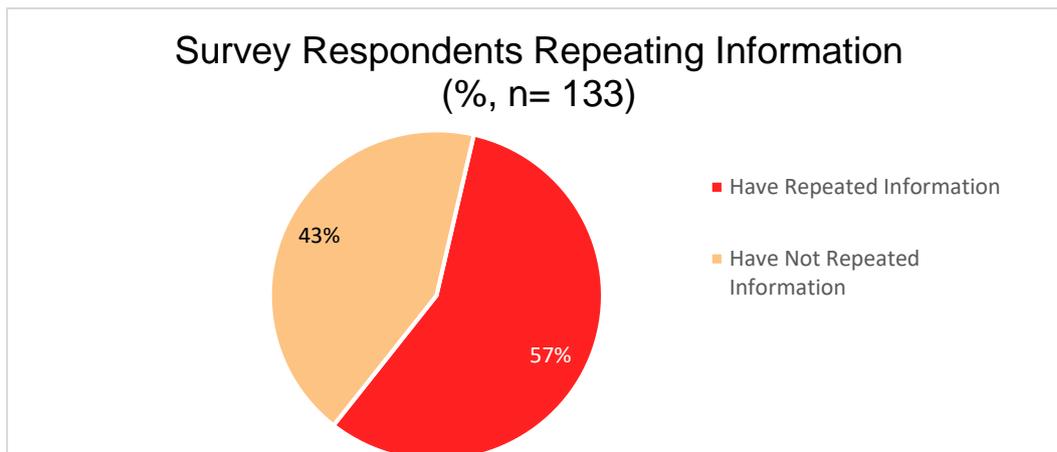
I told them I am sleeping in a car and they couldn't do anything about that. I think they didn't believe me that I was sleeping in my car. Once they saw my car and believed me they started to put me in backpackers and stuff. And then into refuge.

Looking at other housing options, my income was too low. Maybe looking at room shares...It would be good if they could give them a place first, for the night so you can think these guys are going to help me. Instead of turning people away. Give people hope. A space to have a shower, have food, watch television.

2.2.5 Consumer Experience of Repeating Their Information

Figure 4. shows a 57% majority of survey respondents reported having to repeat their information when they accessed a homelessness service. Survey respondents reported that this caused them to become distressed - having to re-tell sensitive information and experiences to different people.

Figure 4. Repeating Information



Below are quotes from survey respondents describing to the impact of repeating their information -

I feel like day in day out, person after person I am continuously repeating myself.

Regardless of the service you are receiving, I have found that there is a constant request to repeat your story over and over. There is very little sharing from one worker to the next.

Police, hospital and family violence refuge - repeat after repeat.

However, there were some responses who described not having to repeat themselves too often. Some have found a case manager and gone from there. Different people with different needs may mean that re-telling information is more common for some people than others depending on what services best suits the individual or family. Below are quotes from survey respondents describing not having to repeat information -

The worker just looked up the information on me and when I worked with someone else at the service they knew everything about me.

I don't think it was the case at [Service provider], I just got to meet with my case manager and didn't really have to repeat it from there other than on intake - so I only really had to do it twice.

It's a constant some services not too bad. I have seen progress in actually try to find some of our notes from other places to prevent us repeating.

2.2.6 Consumer Experience of Waiting for a Service or Program

Survey respondents described both positive and negative experiences waiting for a service or program. The length of time that the survey respondents waited varied from hours to days, to weeks and even years. This is because they are accessing a wide range of services from initial assessment, crisis accommodation, transitional housing to community housing and public housing.

- 42% of survey respondents said they had a short waiting time to access a service or program (total of 120 survey responses)
- 25% of survey respondent described having a long waiting time
- 20% of survey respondent described a regular waiting time, with the rest describing mixed waiting experiences.

Below are quotes from survey respondents describing their experience waiting for a service or program -

Shorter wait times to be linked in with support, e.g. Wait times to see professionals was four to six weeks for a case manager.

Long term housing Public Housing sooner than three years. Although I'm grateful. I feel guilty that I'm here for so long.

This was too long, seven to eight weeks then months for a THM, I was residing in a rooming house with my children, sleeping in one double bed. There were drug addicts, people fighting, it was awful.

Four weeks for my initial meeting but my autistic daughter was sick so I had to cancel a lot of appointments so I didn't get to see my worker until seven weeks.

It took ages - three or four hours at every entry point - it was so annoying.

I had to wait a little for a refuge to become available and within two weeks I was very lucky my worker put me forward for a THM. This has honestly saved my life.

2.3 Housing

The housing section covers survey responses relating to the housing they are currently staying in, the housing they would like to stay in and the barriers to their preferred housing.

2.3.1 Current Housing

Figure 5. below shows the housing types survey respondents described living in. The largest cohort was those living in transitional housing, followed by private rental and refugees. Of the 9% of responses that selected 'Other', four responses described the Towards Home program providing them with accommodation. Six responses said they were couch surfing with friends or living in education supported accommodation.

- 31% of survey respondents were living in transitional housing (total 132)
- Longer term housing in the form of public/community housing combined with private rental made up 25% of respondents' housing.
- Combined, respondents reporting sleeping rough, living in car/caravan park, hotel/motel, friends/family and rooming house accommodation account for 18% of all survey respondents. Although not living in supported crisis accommodation, this is a similar cohort and may be estimated to be in crisis.

Figure 5. Current Housing of Survey Respondents

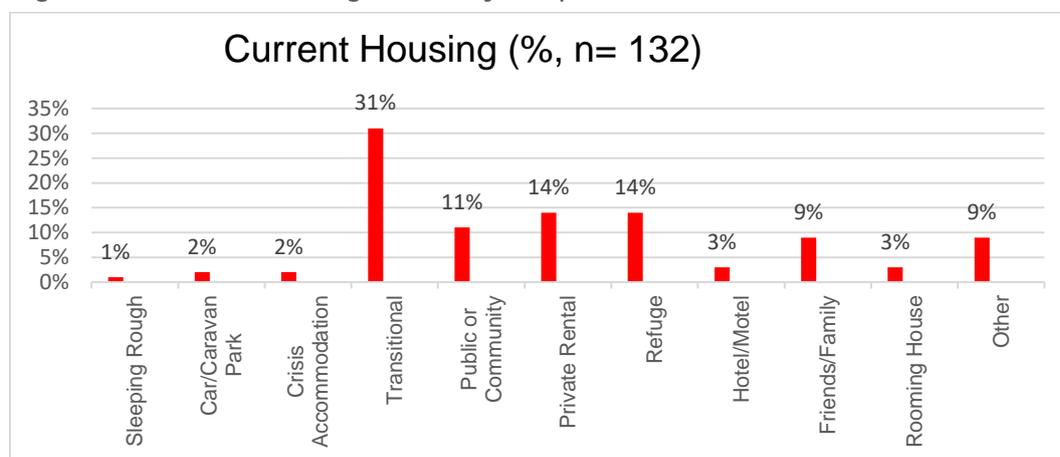
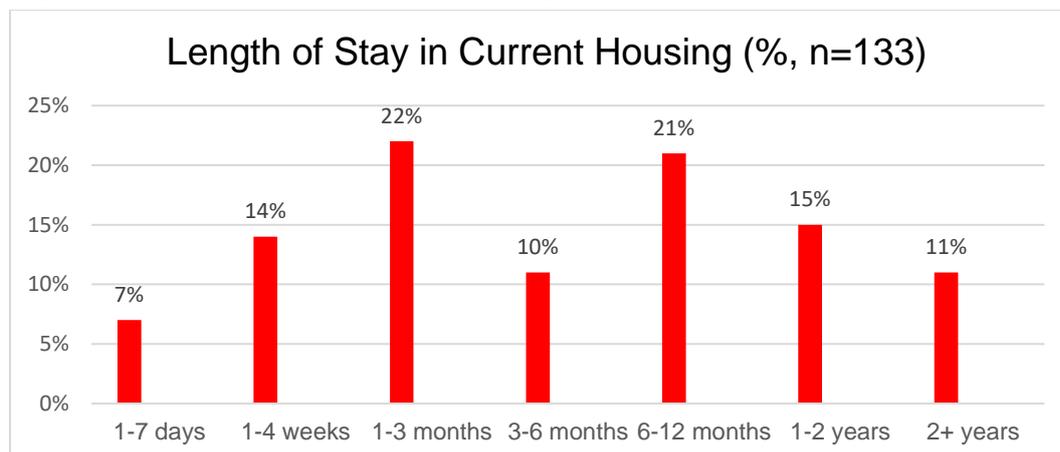


Figure 6. below shows that a 53% majority of survey respondents said they have stayed in their housing for six months or less compared to 37% who have stayed in their housing for six months or more. The experience survey respondents had in their housing was largely positive with -

- 61% of survey responses described a positive experience in their current housing (of a total of 126 survey responses)
- 23% of responses described having a negative experience in their current housing
- the remaining responses mainly described a mixed experience that had both positive and negative aspects shaping their experience.

Figure 6. Time Spent in Current Housing



Below are quotes from survey respondents describing their experience living in their housing -

My THM is great, near public transport, shops everything I need is close. My worker visits regularly and we discuss my case plan this includes my goals for the future, I enjoy living here.

I have really liked staying here, this has allowed me to be stable and link in with services to address my issues. I have a drug counsellor a CCO officer, a mental health worker, a parenting support, a housing worker and DHHS. I have had my child in a safe place and been able to keep him in my care. I am now in the process of getting my other child back and this housing has really helped me achieve this.

Oh my god the worst. All the time noise, fighting, blood on the floor. Very disgusting environment for children. I've seen it all - poo, syringes, glass on the floor.

Experience has not been good, house small and neighbours have been rude. I have five children and live in a two bed-roomed house.

2.3.2 Types of Housing Sought After

Figure 7. shows the two most common answers in response to the question 'What sort of housing are you looking for?' were private rental (40%) and public housing (30%). Preference for transitional and community housing were low (9% and 4% respectively) as was preference for rooming houses (2%)

Qualitative responses described respondents' desire for safe housing, in an area that feels comfortable for them and can provide a good space for families. Both private rental and public housing are types of housing that are generally considered long term, although survey respondents described problems with both types of housing. Waiting times for public housing can last for years and private rentals are difficult to find for those on a very low income. Below are quotes describing preferred housing types of survey respondents -

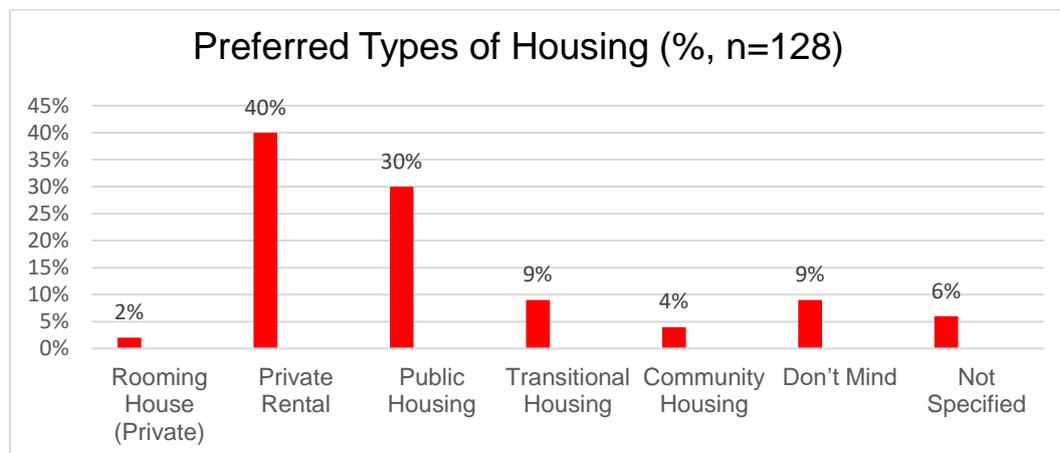
Transitional housing, not being housed in motels or caravan parks which are scary for my children as they wonder why they aren't living in a house like their friends and extended family do.

I'm looking for private renting, public housing and community housing. My son's autistic and struggles socially so attending inspections can be difficult and stressful and also the affordability of private rental is too high compared with my Centrelink parenting income.

I am looking for public housing but in a better area. There is a long waiting time. It is hard when you only receive two offers and you feel like you have to take a gamble. The place I was offered in the area that I did want was not kid friendly and did not feel safe.

I want transitional housing and then private rental shared and then rooming house.

Figure 7. Preferred Types of Housing



2.3.3 Barriers to Preferred Housing

There were two main responses to the question of 'What makes it difficult for you to access this type of housing?' (total of 122 survey responses). The most common barrier described was that they did not have sufficient regular income, whether from employment, income support, or both, to compete in private rental against those with higher incomes. There were a significant amount of respondents who described how they were still waiting for either public housing, transitional housing or for affordable private rentals to become available. Other reasons described by survey respondents included a lack of understanding of the housing system and not knowing what to do or where to go for support.

- 39% of survey respondents described very low income and high rents as a barrier to private rental. This was the most common barrier among respondents
- 33 % of survey respondents described the waiting times on public housing lists as a barrier to preferred housing. This was the second most common barrier among respondents.

Below are quotes describing barriers to preferred housing -

When I was homeless, [there was a] lack of information. Not having any support to apply for housing. Now it comes down to all the laws, rules and how other people are waiting too. I think Melbourne just got crowded and there isn't enough housing and the government doesn't really know what to do.

The waiting time even though I have been approved for priority housing I am still waiting after three years.

Long waitlist, government changes, uncertainty, no updates, constantly not knowing where I am on the housing lists.

The rental market is difficult to access as its not affordable for families on Newstart. Also government housing is not easily available.

I have a disability and require the use of a wheelchair, As a result any accommodation needs to be fully accessible.

2.4 Consumer Feedback on Homelessness Service Responses

This section is on feedback from survey respondents that that described any additional issues relating to homelessness and homelessness services. Responses described possible improvements and general feedback which is highlighted in this section.

2.4.1 Improvements Suggested by Consumers

Additional feedback was asked for to understand what can be done to improve the support given to those at risk of homelessness and experiencing homelessness. 42% of survey respondents said they would like to see more support and resources given to consumers and services who work with them in response to homelessness (total of 114 survey responses). This support ranged from more financial assistance, more specialised workers and shorter waiting periods. Below are quotes from survey respondents that describe what they would like to see -

Programs for clients to complete to better assess someone's motivates to ensure they get help quicker.

More finances into helping people into a rental like more money per person allocated.

More support services so that people will feel listened to, supported and help navigating Centrelink, and other community services for material aid counselling etc.

More support, advocacy, respect, communication between services.

More access to support with employment pathways. More funding available for housing and employment opportunities. More access to mobile phones so that clients can call potential employers, landlords etc.

Regulation of rooming houses - I got assaulted a couple of times. And many were dumps.

More information about different services that could be helpful while I wait.

18% of survey respondents (total of 114 survey responses) described a desire to see more available and more safe short term housing such as crisis accommodation and transitional housing. This is important as at the time of completion of the survey, over half of survey respondents who answered the question about their current housing, said they were staying in either transitional housing, crisis accommodation, refuges, hotels or motels. Below are quotes from survey respondents who describe wanting more short term housing options -

More crisis accommodation / supported accommodation; better access to these places, increase availability. More emergency accommodation (e.g. motels or other short-term options) funding and availability.

More short term accommodation, easier access and wrap around supports.

More supply of transitional housing, increase to Newstart allowances in line with the cost of living so at least it's affordable to pay for rent and food, not just one or the other.

More short term premises dedicated to families.

More funding for short term so when people are homeless they can have a roof over their head.

It is also important to give mention to the 14% of respondents that described a desire for more understanding and a removal of stigma that is unfortunately still associated with homelessness. Below are quotes from survey respondents describing a desire for a more understanding approach towards homelessness -

I'm tired of the dole bludging, lazy, want things for free notion they're pushing. Being homeless isn't a character flaw...

Just how we get treated by some of the workers we are still human we have lost our way a bit more compassion and understanding is needed.

I would like to see more awareness and acceptance of people who become homeless...

When asked about what could be improved to reduce repeating information, 50% of survey respondents indicated that more communication, including communication between services and organisations, would help alleviate this happening (total of 97 total respondents).

Improvements suggested by survey respondents involve increasing awareness and knowledge of available services and programs, better communication, understanding, and having better systems to reduce consumers having to repeat information. Safe and affordable housing were also strongly represented in the responses of the survey respondents. Below are quotes from survey respondents that they think may help with improving accessibility, wait times, and communication to reduce information being repeated -

More sensitivity towards personal circumstance, and the understanding that we're literally homeless. And that we don't always have the mental or emotional or financial capacity to do certain things. But also being aware of how difficult it is to actually ask for help, and it's really discouraging to be made fun of for asking for help.

Increase awareness of Homelessness Services; especially for clients experiencing homelessness for the first time. I felt the service less intimidating and easier to access once rapport had been established with the workers.

Services could offer more help with paperwork, legal advice and navigating the Centrelink system.

Communication from one organisation to the next when handing over clients. Making sure that the client is not re-traumatised by having to repeat their story.

Phone counsellor someone to check in on me. A counselling service to aid me with the mental trauma, anxiety of being homeless and all the different issues that arise at time.

More help with sourcing services, quicker access to Centrelink, more linked services, more public housing and reduced time frames. More information from DHHS regarding services.

However, there were also responses that described how services and programs were working well for consumers with little improvement to be made. Below are quotes from survey respondents describing services and programs successfully helping consumers -

My worker did it all with checking I could stay at friends or family each night. I felt like she was concerned about my safety.

Once my situation was clear it was not long before the services I needed were available for me to access.

[Service provider] have helped us so we're lucky. I would say consistent support such as we have received.

Case Study 2 - Belinda

Belinda is a woman aged 25-34 and born in Australia. She is a single mother with dependent children under 18. Belinda has accessed one homelessness service because of family violence and homelessness. She said it was difficult to know where to access services and to then navigate them effectively. She has been staying in Transitional Housing for over two years and is looking for public housing. Belinda said a barrier to long term housing is the long wait lists and there are no updates on where her and her children are on the public housing waiting list. She would like to see shorter waiting times and more locations for housing and more secure housing for her children. She suggested introducing a national database for women escaping family violence so they don't have to repeat their stories. She is fearful of not obtaining safe long term accommodation and is unsure of the effects of this uncertainty on her mental health. She added that support services need more funding. Belinda said of her experience –

Difficult to know where to go and who to ask for help, fear of being judged not everyone who is homeless is a drug addict, anyone can be homeless, limited supports i.e. awful rooming houses, drug dens, Dandenong is not a safe area for finding housing when you have children.

Information needs to be readily available to all areas of people, people need to know where they can access services.

Retelling my story over and over is degrading, I do understand that I meet workers who need to be told my story however there could be a system whereby the information is stored and shared with services.

The uncertainty of future safe options, where will my children sleep, fear of not having an understanding of the supports available to me.

Waiting times are ridiculous, people get pushed to breaking point waiting for safe secure housing, and more safe options must be made available.

2.4.2 Further Comments

The last question of the survey gave survey respondents the chance to say anything that they may not have been asked about, either in general or specifically. Below are quotes from survey respondents adding further comments -

Without programs like this me and my children would have continued to be trapped in the domestic violence cycle due to need to not be homeless, I cannot express enough how thankful I am for the help I have received. Thank you.

The longer people have to wait for services the worst their situation will become. Their situation will deteriorate if services do not respond in a timely fashion.

I hope this information has helped I have been through these services for many years where I am now in my life I can finally say I'm safe and happy and my child is happy.

I would hope that you take my thoughts in to consideration - we can prevent homelessness, suicide, poverty and all other wicked issues - we need to think of a new plan - fresh ideas to take action within our communities as well as staying aware and focused. We have the people ready to take action - we just need to utilize them...

It can be a small thing to help someone with this program – but for the person, it can be a big thing, and it can help them feel better.

I am beyond words grateful for all that has been done for me and my daughter. I would undoubtedly recommend these services, people and programmes to anyone else that is in need.

3. Learnings

The learnings section of this report draws out some of the main lessons from the findings of the inaugural SHSN Consumer Survey 2019. Learnings are split into the relevant categories based on the key findings.

3.1 Demographic Learnings

The information from the findings shows that the majority of survey respondents were largely women and young people accessing homelessness services. Findings about the living arrangement of survey respondents show that single people, with or without children, make up a much higher proportion than couples. It is important to provide any and all family types with the support and accommodation they need, from a single person to a family with dependent children.

The majority of survey respondents were born in Australia. However a notable amount of survey respondents were born in a place other than Australia. This is important because it shows that people with different cultural backgrounds, languages, and experiences with housing and homelessness make up a portion of consumers, and that their needs to be taken into consideration.

A significant amount of survey respondents view the inner city, south and south eastern suburbs as home. Homelessness agencies should be working to keep people in the areas they call home where safe, reasonable and affordable. The suburbs most preferred by survey respondents were the outer suburbs of Dandenong, Frankston, and Narre Warren.

3.2 Homelessness Services Learnings

When asked if they have been supported in addressing their issue by a homelessness service, 98% of survey responses to that question were “yes”. Survey respondents also described mixed experiences when it came to accessing housing and homelessness services, including going to multiple services within a twelve month period. They also described positive and negative experiences waiting for services and programs, navigating services and repeating information. The two most common reasons described by survey respondents as to why they presented at homelessness services were homelessness and family violence.

Funding models need to be able to be flexible enough to support the real life experiences of people who have a history of homelessness and/or who have experienced family violence. It is a good reflection on the service system that some survey respondents have described positive, supportive experiences that have assisted them in a timely manner to find appropriate housing, or to stay in their housing. When they described support, survey respondents often described experiences that, although difficult, were positive in the end because the service made sure they were not waiting too long. However, from the negative experiences described by some survey respondents, it is clear that for some consumers it is difficult and confusing to even access a homelessness service, and to then navigate it effectively.

Some survey respondents described communication as being an area for improvement, particularly in relation to re-telling their story. They felt client information was not being transferred between services as effectively as it could be. Communication is important to consumers to make sure they do not have to repeat their information too often, which can be traumatic for some. Survey respondents described a short waiting period more often than not. However, the long waiting periods that consumers experience needs to be reduced where possible. Whilst most survey respondents found their experience to be positive, the difference between a positive experience and a negative experience needs to be addressed to reduce any negative experiences in homelessness services.

3.3 Housing Learnings

There are several important learnings from the survey responses on consumer housing. The majority of survey respondents were living in temporary, short term housing, whereas, their preferred housing was long term housing, in either public housing or private rental. Survey respondents described their desire to live in long term housing that is safe, affordable, and appropriate, particularly for families with children and for people and children with disabilities. There was significant discrepancy between the type of housing survey respondents lived in when they completed the survey and the type of housing they would prefer to live in. While support is important in helping consumers access housing, the types of housing available is limited and affected by structural issues such as the housing market and government policies. Services need to continue to manage consumer and public expectations about the type of housing that can be provided and the waiting periods for these housing types.

Survey respondents were typically living in their current housing for a short period of time. A large majority of survey respondents had stayed in their current housing for less than a year, with many indicating they had only lived there for six months or less. This highlights a difficult dynamic that arises with a lack of affordable long term housing where people who need secure affordable, long term housing stay in short term temporary housing. This is connected to the experience of survey respondents who have found private rental to be unaffordable. Survey respondents clearly stated that paying for a private rental on low income, even on income from employment, is a significant barrier to their preferred housing. This is particularly important as survey respondents have also told us private rental is their most sought-after type of housing and new programs (increased PRAP and PRAP Plus) are looking to the private rental market for long term housing to end homelessness.

The second most common barrier described by survey respondents was waiting times for public housing to become available. There is simply not enough public housing for everyone on the waiting list, nor are there enough private rentals that are affordable to reduce the waiting time of people on public housing waitlists.

3.4 Service Improvements and Additional Learnings

One of the main learnings from survey respondents is that they want to see more resources allocated to housing and homelessness services to improve in several ways. This includes having better communication, promoting awareness of what programs and services are available, and having a more understanding community approach to lessen any stigma that can come with experiencing homelessness. It also means trying to get the best outcome for consumers, ensuring quicker access to stable housing and further advocating to all levels of government for more assistance with housing, whether it be more crisis accommodation or long term public housing. Consumers suggest reducing stigma associated with experiencing homelessness, and it is important to reflect this in the advocacy work of homelessness services.

Another key learning from the consumer feedback is that while there is room to improve, there are also positive stories and outcomes showing the difference homelessness services can make. Some survey respondents included messages of gratitude and thanks, encouraging everyone involved to keep working and providing potentially life changing and life-saving support.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is useful to reflect on the learning of the SHSN Consumer Survey within the consumer participation principles set out in the SHSN Consumer Participation Guide and how the SHSN can learn from the Consumer Survey going forward. The SHSN consumer survey demonstrates to member agencies how to involve consumers in obtaining feedback on service effectiveness and input into issues for future advocacy. The participation principles in the SHSN Consumer Participation Guide includes valuing consumer participation and feedback as way to monitor the quality of homelessness services. Effective consumer participation is a powerful tool for consumers to have their feedback heard with a level of responsiveness and inclusion. Importantly, consumers are actively encouraged to be involved in participation where possible and have their lived experience valued, should they choose to share their story. The feedback given by consumers is an effective way to shape and advocate for homelessness policy change that is inclusive of the experiences of consumers. The SHSN has included quotes and ideas from this Consumer Survey into the submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria, providing a strong example of the use of consumer feedback in policy development and advocacy.

The SHSN Consumer Survey report acknowledges the value of the *Client Voice Framework* from the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS, 2019), released in late 2019, which supports the consumer participation work of the SHSN and our members. SHSN members value the experiences of everybody in the community services system and understand the responsibility to provide, safe, people focused, effective services. The purpose and the findings of the SHSN Consumer Survey align with most of the principles of the new Client Voice Framework. The Consumer Survey values the feedback from consumers and aims to use that feedback to improve the quality of programs and services in the homelessness sector.

The Consumer Survey report informs the work done by member agencies of the SHSN with the consumer perspective in mind. The findings of this report will be used to improve member services to respond to the issues raised by consumers in the survey. The learnings of this report are consistent with the Client Voice Framework, and will improve the work of the SHSN and member agencies in the homelessness sector.

In conclusion, the SHSN Consumer Survey has given consumers in the southern region of Melbourne an opportunity to have a voice and give feedback on the homelessness services they have used. It acknowledges the expertise held by consumers about their lived experience. The SHSN will continue to utilise the Consumer Participation Guide and promote its use by member agencies. This includes a commitment to conducting the Consumer Survey again in two years' time. This also includes promoting consumer voice opportunities to consumers in the South encouraging them to participate as opportunities arise. The SHSN is committed to continue to support and promote consumer participation in the Southern Region.

5. References

Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) 2019 *Client voice framework for community services* <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/client-voice>

North and West Homelessness Networks <http://www.nwhn.net.au/Consumer-Participation.aspx>

Southern Homelessness Services Network (SHSN) 2019 *Consumer Participation Guide* <https://www.shsnetwork.online/consumer-participation>