

# Southern Homelessness Services Network

*Annual Report on*  
**SHSN Information  
Sharing Survey Results**  
**October 2024 - August 2025**

*Reflections on  
demand, emerging trends,  
staff and client issues for  
homelessness services in  
Melbourne' South*



# SHSN

## Table of Contents

|                                       |    |
|---------------------------------------|----|
| Executive Summary .....               | 2  |
| 1. Introduction .....                 | 4  |
| 2. Demand Analysis.....               | 4  |
| 3. Client Challenges and Issues ..... | 8  |
| 4. Staff Challenges and Issues .....  | 12 |
| 5. Emerging Trends .....              | 17 |
| 6. SHSN Recommendations.....          | 22 |

## Executive Summary

The Southern Homelessness Services Network (SHSN) Information Summary Report 2024-25 presents a comprehensive analysis of the homelessness crisis affecting Melbourne's southern region. This report, based on a regular survey of member agencies of the Southern Homelessness Services Network (SHSN), reveals a service system in unprecedented crisis, struggling to meet rapidly escalating demand while facing critical capacity constraints across all service areas.

### Key Findings

#### Demand Analysis: Critical Shortfalls

The analysis reveals severe capacity shortfalls in crisis accommodation, with services unable to meet the overwhelming demand for emergency housing. Initial assessment and planning services are overwhelmed creating risky bottlenecks that leave vulnerable individuals without immediate support. The system faces critical workforce constraints due to staffing shortages, while specialised services for vulnerable populations remain inadequately resourced to meet growing demand.

Housing pathway blockages creating exit pathway failures trapping clients in the system longer than necessary creating bottlenecks for case management services. The report identifies a substantial resources versus need gap in funding adequacy, forcing services to operate with insufficient resources to meet demand.

#### Client Challenges: Complex and Evolving Needs

The report documents a housing affordability and availability crisis that has pushed homelessness beyond traditionally vulnerable populations into working families and individuals. Clients present with increasingly complex needs, including significant mental health issues and complex co-occurring disorders that require sophisticated, integrated responses which are not available when and where needed.

Substance use challenges are prevalent, while youth-specific vulnerabilities have emerged as a critical concern. The analysis reveals that economic hardship and cost of living pressures are driving first-time homelessness among previously stable populations, representing a fundamental shift in the demographics of homelessness. Client presentations show increased acuity and behavioural changes, with more clients presenting with complex needs. The report identifies significant service system inadequacies and gaps that fail to address the full spectrum of client needs, particularly for specific vulnerable populations.

#### Staff Challenges: Workforce in Crisis

The workforce analysis reveals severe staff burnout and emotional exhaustion across the sector, with client violence and staff safety concerns creating dangerous working conditions. Services face persistent recruitment and retention difficulties, exacerbated by funding uncertainty and contract insecurity that prevents long-term workforce planning.

Inadequate staffing levels create unsustainable workload pressures, forcing staff to work beyond their professional expertise in areas where they lack adequate training or support. System pressures and external challenges compound these difficulties, with significant health and wellbeing impacts on staff.

#### Emerging Trends: Fundamental Shifts

The report identifies several critical emerging trends that signal fundamental changes in homelessness patterns:

- Demographic age shift toward much younger clients, indicating early-onset homelessness
- Increasing older adult homelessness, creating new service demands
- First-time homelessness among working populations, representing a shift from traditional vulnerable groups
- Car-dwelling among employed individuals, indicating new forms of housing insecurity
- Digital exclusion creating service access barriers, particularly affecting older adults and vulnerable populations

## Implications and Urgency

The report's findings indicate that homelessness is becoming a mainstream housing affordability issue and the unprecedented demand on services demonstrates that current service investments are fundamentally inadequate to meet evolving community needs. The increasing complexity of client presentations, particularly the rise in co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders, requires more sophisticated and integrated service responses than currently available. New forms of homelessness suggest that traditional service approaches may require fundamental reconsideration.

## Recommendations

1. **A National Plan to End Homelessness** – integrated policy across government portfolios and across Federal, State and local governments is needed to end homelessness. This should be supplemented by a **Victorian Plan to End Homelessness**
2. **Sufficient funding to meet demand** for homelessness assistance – urgent investment in SHS to meet current demand
3. **Vastly greater investment in new social (preferably public) housing** across the Southern region to meet the demand, particularly in outer metropolitan areas, as a priority
4. Increased investment in effective **Housing First programs** and other evidence-based programs that combine stable housing with long term support services
5. **Permanent supportive housing** for those with the most complex needs
6. **Prevention and early intervention** to address newly homeless including people who are employed
7. **Dedicated pathways into new and existing social housing** for people experiencing homelessness – prioritise existing clients of SHS to access social housing
8. Implement **workforce initiatives** to retain and support staff
9. Support for **Advance to Zero approach to end rough sleeping** – expansion of this model across the Southern region is limited due to the lack of assertive outreach in all council areas and limited funding to support the model. This model should be expanded across all Southern councils to address rough sleeping
10. **Lived experience and expertise** – plans, policies and programs to end homelessness should draw on the lived experience and expertise of people who have experienced homelessness and used Specialist Homelessness Services using a co-production approach. Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) need to be resourced and supported to work with people with lived experience authentically.

## Conclusion

This report provides compelling evidence of a homelessness service system in crisis, requiring immediate emergency intervention and substantial long-term reform. The report demonstrates that current approaches are insufficient to address the evolving nature of housing insecurity and emerging trends in homelessness in Melbourne's South.

The SHSN looks forward to the implementation of the report's recommendations to alleviate the pressure on member agencies and work towards ending homelessness in Melbourne's South.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 About the SHSN

The **Vision** of the Southern Homelessness Services Network (SHSN) is an end to homelessness in Southern Region of Melbourne. 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 Southern Homelessness Services Network (SHSN) comprises all funded Specialist Homelessness Services in the Southern Region of Melbourne including services providing crisis, transitional, long term, family violence and youth support and accommodation. Our members include Launch Housing, the Salvation Army, NEAMI, Wayss and Sacred Heart Mission. The SHSN also supports allied service sectors working in homelessness. The SHSN is a resource for the homelessness sector in the South. More information about the SHSN can be found on our website <https://www.shsnetwork.online/>

The Southern Region comprises ten local government areas in Southern Melbourne - Bayside, Cardinia, Casey, Frankston, Glen Eira, Greater Dandenong, Kingston, Mornington Peninsula, Port Phillip and Stonnington. This is a geographically and socio-economically diverse region.

## 1.2 About this report

The SHSN has the following Strategic Objective as part of our Strategic Plan:

***Strategic Objective 2: Act as a conduit between DFFH and regional services on issues and trends to inform policy.***

In 2024, the SHSN introduced a regular Information Sharing Survey to capture issues and trends to better meet this Strategic Objective. The survey is conducted prior to every SHSN Managers Group meeting (bi-monthly) with regular participation of 14-16 agencies on average.

This report brings together an analysis of the results of the SHSN Information Sharing Survey from October 2024 until August 2025, totalling six survey periods including quotes from the surveys. The SHSN plans to produce this report annually to provide the State Government, other governments and policy makers insights into the critical issues facing our member agencies in delivering SHS in Southern Melbourne.

# 2. Demand Analysis

## 2.1 Overview

This analysis of service provider responses reveals a homelessness service system operating under severe strain, with demand consistently exceeding capacity across multiple service types and regions. The data shows a clear pattern of services being unable to meet community need, with widespread waitlists and services operating at or beyond capacity. While some services report meeting their contractual targets, there is a consistent theme that these targets are inadequate relative to actual community need. The analysis reveals significant gaps between funded service capacity and real-world demand, with particular strain on crisis accommodation, case management services, and specialized support for vulnerable populations.

## 2.2 Crisis Accommodation: Severe Capacity Shortfall

Theme Overview: Crisis accommodation services, particularly refuges, are consistently operating at full capacity with no vacancy movement and high referral-to-vacancy ratios.

Key Characteristics:

- Refuges consistently full with no movement
- High referral ratios (5-6 referrals per vacancy)
- Extended stays due to lack of exit pathways
- Geographic gaps in crisis accommodation

#### Quotes:

*Refuge is full, crisis accommodation properties are full. No movement since December last year.*

*On average are receiving 6 referrals for every refuge vacancy. Services are not sufficiently resourced to meet the level of need.*

*There is no local youth crisis accommodation in Frankston, and the nearest refuges in Moorabbin and Dandenong have limited vacancies.*

*Refuge is full with no movement, therefore we cannot meet the needs of victim-survivors waiting in motels or crisis accommodation.*

**Analysis:** Crisis accommodation represents the most acute capacity shortage, with services unable to provide emergency housing to the majority of people seeking it. The lack of movement suggests systemic failures in housing pathways beyond crisis services.

## **2.3 Initial Assessment and Planning: Overwhelmed Entry Points**

**Theme Overview:** Entry point and initial assessment services are experiencing unprecedented demand levels, resulting in significant delays in response times and inability to meet service standards.

#### Key Characteristics:

- Services reaching capacity early in the day
- Backlogs and waitlists for basic assessments
- Exceeded annual targets despite inadequate response

#### Quotes:

*We are experiencing an increase in demand for our services that exceeds the capacity of our staff to respond to. This creates a backlog/waitlist for services which we manage and respond to. This has led to a 24 - 72 hour delay in our ability to respond to people seeking support*

*IAP continues to reach capacity quite early in the day. Need more funding for more staffing.*

*TSA Peninsula has always significantly exceeded the annual IAP targets set by DFFH.*

*As outlined in previous reports our Entry Point is experiencing high levels of demand that we are not able to keep up with, and this has resulted in delays in our ability to respond.*

**Analysis:** Entry points are the gateway to the homelessness service system, and their inability to respond promptly indicates fundamental capacity issues that create bottlenecks throughout the entire system.

## **2.4 Staffing Shortages: Critical Workforce Constraints**

**Theme Overview:** Chronic understaffing across services is limiting capacity to meet demand, with services unable to fill positions or maintain adequate staffing levels.

#### Key Characteristics:

- Vacant positions affecting service delivery
- Budget constraints preventing adequate staffing
- Teams operating below capacity due to recruitment challenges
- Creative service delivery to manage staffing gaps

#### Quotes:

*We do not have sufficient staffing levels to meet demand. Budget does not allow for increase staffing allocations.*

*Due to low staffing, we are unable to meet demand consistently.*

*We have a current waitlist due to staffing vacancies.*

**Analysis:** Staffing shortages appear to be both a cause and consequence of system strain, with services unable to recruit and retain staff while managing overwhelming demand levels.

## 2.5 Specialized Population Services: Unmet Demand for Vulnerable Groups

**Theme Overview :** Services for specific populations (older adults, youth, women, First Nations people) are experiencing particular strain with inadequate capacity to meet specialized needs.

**Key Characteristics :**

- Age-specific service gaps
- Gender-specific accommodation mismatches
- Specialized support program waitlists
- Cultural service delivery challenges

**Analysis :** Specialized services for vulnerable populations are experiencing particular strain, suggesting that mainstream services may not be adequately meeting diverse needs.

## 2.6 Case Management Services: Capacity vs. Demand Mismatch

**Theme Overview :** Case management services show mixed capacity, with some having availability while others maintain substantial waitlists, indicating potential service coordination issues.

**Key Characteristics :**

- Varied capacity across different case management programs
- Some services with capacity unable to receive appropriate referrals
- Substantial waitlists for specific programs (e.g., Tenancy Plus with 70 referrals)
- Funding targets not aligned with actual demand

**Quotes:**

*We are meeting demand in terms of our contractual requirements, but in terms of what would most assist service users, we are merely getting by -- we have very little to offer in terms of housing or financial assistance.*

*Case management services are constrained by DFFH funding targets, which have remained the same despite more flexibility with extended engagement opportunities.*

**Analysis:** The mismatch between case management capacity and crisis accommodation availability suggests system coordination issues, with clients able to access support but not housing.

## 2.7 Housing Pathway Blockages: Exit Pathway Failures

**Theme Overview :** Lack of housing options beyond crisis accommodation is creating bottlenecks throughout the system, with clients unable to move on from temporary accommodation.

**Key Characteristics:**

- No movement from crisis accommodation
- Successful transitions noted as unusual occurrences
- Limited transitional housing options
- Affordable housing shortage affecting all pathways

**Quotes:**

*Absolutely not meeting demand of people not able to find a rental property or affordable housing, not accessing rooming houses and unable to get rough sleepers housed or accommodated into emergency housing.*

*We are unable to meet demand in certain areas but have recently had many successful transitions out of our properties (which is new!)*

*Young people are placed on statewide waitlists or offered housing such as rooming houses which can be unsafe for many cohorts.*

**Analysis:** The lack of housing pathways beyond crisis accommodation is creating system-wide bottlenecks, preventing services from meeting new demand due to existing clients being unable to move on.

## 2.8 Funding Adequacy: Resources vs. Need Gap

**Theme Overview:** Consistent reports that current funding levels are inadequate to meet actual community demand for homelessness services.

### Key Characteristics:

- Contractual targets exceeded but needs still unmet
- Budget constraints preventing capacity expansion
- Funding models not reflecting current demand levels
- Resource shortages affecting service quality

**Analysis:** The gap between funded capacity and actual demand suggests that current funding models may be based on outdated needs assessments or inadequate investment in homelessness services.

## 2.9 Service Adaptation and Innovation: Creative Responses to Demand

**Theme Overview:** Services are adapting their delivery models and finding creative solutions to manage overwhelming demand within existing resources.

### Key Characteristics:

- Temporary service delivery modifications
- Creative referral sourcing strategies
- Service restructuring to maximize capacity
- Prioritization and triage approaches

**Analysis:** While service innovation demonstrates sector resilience, it also indicates that services are operating beyond their intended capacity and may be compromising service quality to meet demand.

## 2.10 Hidden And Unmet Demand: Unknown Service Needs

**Theme Overview:** Some services acknowledge that there may be significant unmet demand that they are not aware of, suggesting the true scale of need may be underestimated.

### Key Characteristics:

- People not seeking help due to system knowledge
- Service users not disclosing full needs
- Geographic barriers to service access
- Stigma preventing help-seeking

### Quotes:

*There is probably unmet demand we are not necessarily aware of because people come for a meal and may not ask for additional assistance. Many people who come to our hubs are not help seeking.*

**Analysis:** The acknowledgment of hidden demand suggests that current demand measurements may underestimate the true scale of homelessness service needs in the community.

## 2.11 Cross-Cutting Demand Patterns and System Analysis

### System Bottlenecks Creating Cascading Effects

Housing pathway blockages are creating cascading effects throughout the system:

- Clients unable to exit crisis accommodation
- New clients unable to access crisis services



- Entry points overwhelmed with repeat presentations
- Case management services with capacity but no housing options

#### Workforce and Resource Constraints

- Staffing and funding constraints are limiting system capacity:
- Vacant positions affecting service delivery
- Budget limitations preventing expansion
- Funding targets not aligned with actual demand
- Creative service delivery to manage gaps

## **2.12 Demand Analysis Conclusion**

This analysis reveals a homelessness service system operating in crisis, with demand consistently exceeding capacity across all service types and regions. The data shows that while services are meeting contractual targets, these targets are inadequate relative to actual community need. The system is characterized by bottlenecks in housing pathways, chronic understaffing, and funding models that do not reflect current demand realities.

Perhaps most concerning is the evidence of hidden and unmet demand, suggesting that current measurements may underestimate the true scale of homelessness service needs. The creative adaptations and service modifications reported by providers demonstrate sector resilience but also indicate that services are operating beyond their intended capacity, potentially compromising service quality and sustainability.

Without significant investment in capacity expansion, workforce development, and system coordination, the data suggests that demand will continue to outstrip supply, with potentially serious consequences for service user safety and system sustainability. The consistent themes across different service types and regions indicate that this is a systemic issue requiring coordinated policy response rather than isolated service improvements.

## **3. Client Challenges and Issues**

### **3.1 Overview**

This analysis of the SHSN survey responses reveals a complex landscape of interconnected challenges facing clients in homelessness and housing services. The data shows a concerning trend toward increased complexity in client presentations, with mental health issues, substance use disorders, and housing affordability creating a perfect storm of barriers to successful outcomes. Service providers report clients presenting with higher acuity needs, increased anger and frustration, and multiple overlapping vulnerabilities that strain existing support systems.

### **3.2 Housing Affordability and Availability Crisis**

Theme Overview: The most pervasive challenge identified across all responses is the critical shortage of affordable housing options, affecting all client demographics from young people to older adults.

#### Key sub-themes:

- Private rental market unaffordability
- Limited transitional housing options
- Long wait times for social housing
- Unrealistic client expectations vs. market reality

#### Quotes:

*Older persons need affordable housing. Private rental market is unaffordable for older persons on a pension*

*Ongoing lack of housing exit options - clients are completely priced out of private rental - no recent THM offers*

*The lack of affordable housing continues to be a significant issues for many of our clients. This is in both the private rental market and in accessing rooming house vacancies.*

*No housing outcomes. All of our clients have been residing in refuge for many months, almost a year for three of our families. No transitional housing. Community Housing is becoming unaffordable also.*

*Housing affordability within the region an ongoing issue particularly for single young people not wanting supported options but trying to access shared accommodation.*

**Analysis:** The housing crisis appears to be the fundamental barrier underlying many other challenges. Clients are spending extended periods in temporary accommodation, creating bottlenecks in the system and preventing new clients from accessing services.

### 3.3 Mental Health Service Gaps and Complex Presentations

**Theme Overview:** Significant gaps in mental health services, particularly for clients with acute needs, combined with increasing complexity of mental health presentations among clients.

**Key sub-themes:**

- Inadequate crisis mental health support
- Long wait times for mental health assessments
- Intersection of mental health with homelessness
- Youth mental health crisis
- Suicidal ideation linked to homelessness

**Quotes:**

*Lack of mental health support for people acutely unwell.*

*Many young people present mental health issues, both diagnosed and not diagnosed.*

*Many young people report mental health issues and some disclose suicidal ideations caused by homelessness.*

*Difficulties getting people assessed by mental health services - lack of resources.*

**Analysis:** Mental health emerges as both a contributing factor to homelessness and a consequence of it, creating a cyclical pattern that's difficult to break without adequate specialized support.

### 3.4 Substance Use and Addiction Challenges

**Theme Overview:** Increasing presentations of clients with substance use disorders, often intersecting with mental health issues and creating barriers to accessing appropriate accommodation and treatment.

**Key sub-themes:**

- Difficulty accessing detox and rehabilitation services
- Barriers to accommodation due to substance use
- Intersection with mental health issues
- Limited refuge options for substance users

**Quotes:**

*Barriers to receiving mental health treatment where there is substance use and multiplicity in the complexity of the client, their behaviours and support needs*

*Lack of refuge stays for younger cohorts. Lots being turned away due to substance use but nowhere else for them to go.*

*AOD clients struggling to get into detox/rehab*

*Seeing increased presentation of drug and alcohol issues*

*More complex intersecting needs, AOD and mental health, family violence intersecting with homelessness as primary presenting issue*

**Analysis:** Substance use creates additional barriers to housing and treatment, with clients often excluded from services rather than receiving specialized support for their dual diagnoses.

### 3.5 Youth-Specific Vulnerabilities

**Theme Overview:** Young people face unique challenges including citizenship issues, employment instability and educational disengagement.

**Key sub-themes:**

- Citizenship and Centrelink access issues
- Employment instability affecting housing applications
- Educational disengagement
- Complex trauma presentations

**Quotes:**

*Young people who are New Zealand citizens but have resided in Australia the majority of their lives. Nil access to Centrelink and when employment is not an option (due to pregnancy or disability) options are incredibly limited.*

*Young people aiming at securing private rentals start working, then lose jobs or have reduced work hours.*

*Currently have one YP who has been at refuge for 9 months.*

**Analysis:** Young people face age-specific barriers that compound general housing and mental health challenges, with concerning trends toward violence and extended stays in crisis accommodation.

### 3.6 Economic Hardship and Cost of Living Pressures

**Theme Overview:** Clients across all demographics are experiencing increased financial stress due to rising costs of living, affecting their ability to secure and maintain housing.

**Key sub-theme:**

- Impact on families with children
- Employment precarity
- Inability to afford rental applications and bonds
- Need for material support (clothing, food)

**Quotes:**

*Adults: cost of living crisis, financial hardship, decrease in social and emotional wellbeing*

*Cost of living pressures noticeable being felt by clients. Two new single parent clients with school age children.*

*Young people struggle financially and require additional support to purchase work clothes to attend job interviews or work. Young people have insufficient funds to apply for private rental and are struggling with cost of living.*

*Part-time and casual workers have difficulties with providing a proof of their income.*

**Analysis:** Economic pressures are creating additional barriers to housing stability and forcing clients to rely more heavily on support services for basic needs.

### 3.7 Client Behavioural Changes and Increased Acuity

**Theme Overview:** Service providers report clients presenting with higher levels of anger, frustration, and complex behavioural issues, likely reflecting the stress of prolonged homelessness and system failures.

**Key sub-themes:**

- Increased anger and frustration
- Violence and threatening behaviour

- Anti-social behaviour leading to evictions
- Communication difficulties

#### Quotes:

*Clients seem to be presenting angrier in regard to the issues facing them.*

*In past month had multiple incidents with male clients threatening or using violence. Some in the context of poor mental health, and challenge in linking in with appropriate mental health support.*

*Challenge of people being evicted from long-term or supported options due to anti-social behaviour to return to IAP services.*

*Increase of incidents, high acuity clients without suitable housing outcomes*

*Clients need more support due to presenting issues*

**Analysis:** The increasing acuity and behavioural complexity of clients reflects the strain of prolonged homelessness and inadequate support systems, creating additional challenges for service delivery.

### **3.8 Service System Inadequacies and Gaps**

**Theme Overview:** Significant gaps in service coordination, quality of referrals, wait times, and availability of specialized services across the homelessness support system.

#### Key sub-themes:

- Poor quality intake assessments and referrals
- Long wait times for essential services
- Limited specialized services for complex needs
- Coordination challenges between services

#### Quotes:

*Currently receiving quite poor quality IAPs into the refuge (this is from entry points across regions). IAPs with big gaps in information relating to risk*

*There are currently long wait times for assessments and home care packages which can help people live independently.*

*Limited resources to refer people for support.*

*First Nations clients not wanting to engage with ACCOs.*

**Analysis:** System-level issues are creating barriers to effective service delivery and contributing to poor outcomes for clients with complex needs.

### **3.9 Specific Population Vulnerabilities**

**Theme Overview:** Certain populations face additional barriers including older adults, First Nations clients, people with disabilities, and those with specific cultural or linguistic needs.

#### Key sub-themes:

- Older adults' housing and health needs
- First Nations engagement challenges
- Disability and NDIS coordination issues
- Cultural and linguistic barriers

**Analysis:** Specialized populations require tailored approaches that current services may not be adequately equipped to provide.

### 3.10 Cross-Cutting Patterns and Insights

#### System Strain and Capacity Issues

Across all themes, there's evidence of system strain with services unable to meet demand, resulting in:

- Extended stays in crisis accommodation
- Clients being turned away from services
- Inadequate specialized support
- Staff safety concerns

#### Geographic and Regional Variations

Some responses indicate regional differences in service availability and housing markets, with particular challenges noted in certain areas like Frankston.

### 3.11 Client Challenges Analysis Conclusion

This analysis reveals a homelessness service system under significant strain, with clients presenting increasingly complex needs in the context of a severe housing affordability crisis. The interconnected nature of client challenges—spanning mental health, substance use, financial hardship, and social isolation—requires coordinated, holistic responses that current service systems appear unable to adequately provide.

The concerning trends toward increased client acuity, longer stays in crisis accommodation, and safety issues suggest that without significant system reform and investment, outcomes for vulnerable clients will continue to deteriorate. Addressing these challenges will require both immediate service improvements and longer-term systemic reforms to housing policy, income support, and service integration. The voices of service providers captured in this data provide valuable insights into the daily realities of working with highly vulnerable populations and should inform policy and practice development moving forward.

## 4. Staff Challenges and Issues

### 4.1 Overview

This analysis reveals a homelessness workforce operating under severe strain, with staff experiencing high levels of burnout, frustration, and professional challenges that threaten service sustainability. The data shows widespread issues with recruitment and retention, increased client aggression and violence toward staff, and significant psychological impacts from working in a system with limited housing outcomes. Staff are reporting feelings of powerlessness and ineffectiveness due to the gap between client needs and available resources, particularly housing options, while organizations struggle with funding uncertainty, inadequate staffing levels, and the challenge of supporting workers dealing with increasingly complex client presentations. The analysis indicates that workforce challenges are both a symptom of and contributor to broader system failures in homelessness services.

### 4.2 Staff Burnout and Emotional Exhaustion

Theme Overview: Widespread reports of staff burnout, fatigue, and emotional exhaustion, particularly related to the inability to achieve positive housing outcomes for clients.

#### Key Characteristics:

- Feelings of ineffectiveness and powerlessness
- Burnout linked to lack of housing outcomes
- Fatigue from complex client presentations
- Vicarious trauma concerns

#### Quotes:

*Seeing staff reporting increased burnout and feeling ineffective -- particularly with no housing outcomes recently.*

*IAP staff have indicated in supervision that sometimes they feel powerless and helpless to assist clients due to a lack of affordable, safe housing options for crisis and long term housing.*

*A lot of staff fatigue related to complex cohort and struggles to secure housing options. Particularly young males with substance use and MH.*

*Always being mindful of vicarious trauma and burn out for the staff*

*Staff burn out is evident and is high on the agenda at all times*

*Staff burn out is a significant challenge. All Specialist Homelessness Services are facing that currently*

*Not new trend but recruitment and retention remain an issue. Only attracting new grads to positions and for existing staff there is increasing fatigue at the complexity of client group supported and the lack of housing outcomes available.*

**Analysis:** Staff burnout appears to be a systemic issue across homelessness services, directly linked to the frustration of being unable to provide effective solutions to clients due to housing shortages and system limitations.

### 4.3 Client Violence and Staff Safety Concerns

**Theme Overview:** Increasing incidents of client aggression, violence, and threatening behaviour toward staff, creating safety concerns and requiring additional support measures.

**Key Characteristics:**

- Regular incidents of verbal abuse and threats
- Physical violence and property damage
- Spitting and other aggressive behaviors
- Need for additional safety training and support

**Quotes:**

*We are seeing regular incidents involving clients where they are becoming abusive and aggressive towards staff.*

*We are continuing to see frequent critical client incidents that range from verbal abuse and threats to spitting, physical outbursts and property damage occurring in our front of house reception area.*

*Due to the sustained regularity of these incidents, we as an organisation, are rolling out additional measures including training and access to frequent psychological debriefing sessions to support the wellbeing of our teams.*

**Analysis:** The increase in client violence appears to reflect broader system pressures and client frustration, but is creating additional trauma and stress for staff who are already dealing with challenging working conditions.

### 4.4 Recruitment and Retention Difficulties

**Theme Overview:** Significant challenges in recruiting and retaining experienced staff, with services primarily attracting new graduates and experiencing high turnover rates.

**Key Characteristics:**

- Minimal applicants for advertised positions
- High staff turnover rates
- Only attracting inexperienced candidates
- Difficulty filling specialized roles

**Quotes :**

*Recruitment for fixed term role, minimal applicants.*

*Continually recruiting, onboarding and training new staff. Model is not sustainable.*

### *Recruitment and staff retention*

*Only attracting new grads to positions and for existing staff there is increasing fatigue*

*Vacant positions are only attracting people that are new to the sector or with limited experience which is requiring more support from team leaders particularly around risk assessment given complex cohort being supported*

*We have been recruiting staff and have been able to fill case manager roles. Difficulty with filling therapeutic practitioner roles with experience in family violence.*

**Analysis:** The recruitment crisis appears to be creating a cycle where inexperienced staff require more support and supervision, placing additional pressure on experienced staff and potentially affecting service quality.

## **4.5 Funding Uncertainty and Contract Insecurity**

**Theme Overview:** Uncertainty about funding continuation and reliance on short-term contracts is affecting staff retention and creating anxiety about job security.

### Key Characteristics:

- Staff leaving due to funding uncertainty
- Short-term contracts affecting recruitment
- Program funding at risk
- Budget constraints limiting staffing levels

### Quotes:

*Concerns from staff around the renewal of contracts for the homelessness programs*

*Funding insecurity in Vic has contributed to staff resignations, as programs without recurrent funding create uncertainty for both service delivery and workforce stability*

*Lack of funding for appropriate staffing levels to meet the service demand*

**Analysis:** Funding uncertainty is creating a vicious cycle where services lose experienced staff due to job insecurity, making it harder to deliver effective services and justify continued funding.

## **4.6 Inadequate Staffing Levels and Workload Pressures**

**Theme Overview:** Services operating with insufficient staff to meet demand, creating unsustainable workloads and compromising service quality.

### Key Characteristic :

- Staff working beyond capacity
- Need for additional positions
- High caseloads and demand
- Staff covering multiple roles

### Quotes:

*We need more IAP staff to cope with the increased demand in IAP and also need more Transitional Support Case Managers to assist with the throughput from IAP in to case management.*

*Trying to manage the increase in demand for services and manage the expectations of service users and referring agencies.*

*We have a couple of vacancies, which has impacted our capacity and created a growing waitlist.*

**Analysis:** Inadequate staffing levels are forcing remaining staff to work beyond sustainable levels, contributing to burnout and potentially compromising service quality and safety.

## 4.7 Working Beyond Professional Expertise

**Theme Overview:** Staff being required to provide support in areas where they lack proper training or qualifications, creating professional and ethical challenges.

**Key Characteristics:**

- Working outside areas of expertise
- Lack of specialized training
- Managing complex issues without appropriate qualifications
- Need for additional professional development

**Quotes:**

*Services are finding it challenging to manage the daily demand for their services. This means that staff are often left to manage client support needs in areas where they do not have the expertise or qualifications to respond, ie. financial counselling, mental health, AOD.*

**Analysis:** The complexity of client presentations is requiring staff to work beyond their professional competencies, potentially creating ethical issues and contributing to staff stress and burnout.

## 4.8 System Pressures and External Challenges

**Theme Overview:** Staff are dealing with challenges that extend beyond their immediate workplace, including broader system failures and external pressures.

**Key Characteristics:**

- Frustration with external systems (mental health, housing)
- Dealing with system-wide capacity issues
- Managing client and agency expectations
- Impact of service closures and restructures

**Quotes:**

*With the long wait times for assessments, that compounds staff stress because not only is there no housing, it's also a huge challenge to get support for people*

*Same challenges of staff fatigue at lack of outcomes and general sector wide pressures around staffing with lots of orgs making staffing cuts/merging/restructures*

*Just generalized fatigue at the homelessness system and the lack of resources to be able to offer clients in crisis*

**Analysis:** Staff challenges are compounded by broader system failures, creating a sense of working within a failing system that extends beyond their immediate control or influence.

## 4.9 Health and Wellbeing Impacts

**Theme Overview:** Staff health and wellbeing is being significantly impacted by workplace challenges, with increased sick leave and health issues.

**Key Characteristics:**

- Extended periods of sick leave
- Impact of illness on service delivery
- COVID and flu affecting rosters
- Need for psychological support

**Quotes:**

*Access to frequent psychological debriefing sessions to support the wellbeing of our teams.*



**Analysis:** The physical and mental health impacts on staff are creating additional operational challenges and suggesting that current working conditions may be unsustainable from a health and safety perspective.

## 4.10. Training and Support Needs

**Theme Overview:** Recognition of the need for additional training and support for staff dealing with complex client presentations and challenging working conditions.

### Key Characteristics:

- Need for specialised training
- Support for new and inexperienced staff
- Risk assessment and safety training
- Harm reduction and therapeutic approaches

**Analysis:** The need for additional training and support reflects both the complexity of current client presentations and the inexperience of available staff, creating additional resource pressures.

## 4.11 Service Delivery Adaptations

**Theme Overview:** Organizations are adapting their service delivery models and staff utilization to manage workforce challenges and maintain services.

### Key Characteristics:

- Dynamic staff utilization approaches
- Cross-training for multiple roles
- Flexible service delivery models
- Focus on achievable outcomes

### Quotes:

*Staff have been managing their workloads as effectively and efficiently as possible, including through a dynamic approach to staff utilisation. This approach sees staff having the adequate skills and training to cover multiple different roles within the entry point depending on where demand requires it.*

*Managing well, focus on what they can do to support the person, other than housing*

**Analysis:** While service adaptations demonstrate organizational resilience, they also indicate that services are operating in crisis mode and may be compromising specialized service delivery to maintain basic operations.

## 4.12 Cross-Cutting Patterns and Workforce System Analysis

### System-Level Workforce Crisis Indicators

Multiple indicators suggest a system-wide workforce crisis:

- Widespread burnout across all service types
- Recruitment difficulties affecting service capacity
- Safety concerns requiring additional organizational responses
- Health impacts on staff affecting service delivery

### Organizational Adaptation Strategies

Organizations are implementing various strategies to manage workforce challenges:

- Cross-training and flexible role assignments
- Additional safety training and psychological support
- Dynamic staffing approaches
- Focus on achievable rather than ideal outcomes

## External Factors Affecting Workforce

Staff challenges are significantly influenced by external factors:

- Housing market failures affecting client outcomes
- Mental health system inadequacies
- Funding model limitations
- Broader economic pressures

### **4.13 Staff Challenges Analysis Conclusion**

This analysis reveals a homelessness workforce in crisis, with staff experiencing unprecedented levels of burnout, safety concerns, and professional challenges that threaten the sustainability of the entire service system. The data shows that workforce challenges are both a symptom of and contributor to broader system failures, with staff bearing the brunt of inadequate housing options, funding uncertainty, and increasing client complexity.

The widespread reports of burnout and feelings of ineffectiveness among staff reflect the fundamental mismatch between client needs and available resources. Staff are being asked to provide solutions to homelessness while lacking the basic tools (housing) necessary to be effective, creating a profound sense of professional frustration and moral distress.

Perhaps most concerning is the evidence of increasing client violence toward staff, suggesting that the stress and frustration within the system is manifesting in ways that threaten worker safety. Combined with recruitment difficulties that leave services relying heavily on inexperienced staff, this creates significant risks for both service quality and worker wellbeing.

The funding uncertainty and short-term contract arrangements reported across multiple services are exacerbating workforce challenges by creating job insecurity that drives away experienced staff. This creates a vicious cycle where services lose their most skilled workers precisely when they are dealing with the most complex client presentations.

## **5. Emerging Trends**

### **5.1 Overview**

This analysis of SHSN survey responses reveals significant demographic shifts and emerging patterns in homelessness service delivery, with particularly concerning trends around the increasing presentation of much younger clients (16-17 year olds), rising homelessness among older adults, and growing complexity of client needs. The data indicates a broadening of the homelessness crisis beyond traditional demographics, with first-time homelessness experiences increasing and housing affordability creating new vulnerabilities across age groups. Mental health challenges, substance use disorders, and family violence continue to intersect with housing instability, while service capacity struggles to meet unprecedented demand.

### **5.2 Trend: Demographic Age Shift - Much Younger Clients**

Trend Overview: A notable increase in very young people (15-17 years old) accessing homelessness services, representing a shift toward younger client demographics than traditionally seen.

#### Key Characteristics:

- High levels of mental health distress
- Significant substance use patterns
- Complex family breakdown situations
- School engagement challenges

#### Quotes:

*Young young people - 16/17-year-olds. Heavy substance use & significant mental health challenges*

*A lot of younger people (15 and 16) coming through. High levels of mental health distress*

**Analysis:** This trend suggests earlier onset of homelessness risk factors and indicates potential gaps in early intervention and family support systems. The intersection with substance use and mental health challenges at such young ages is particularly concerning.

### 5.3 Trend: Older Adult Homelessness

**Trend Overview:** Significant increase in older adults experiencing homelessness, primarily driven by rental market pressures and fixed income inadequacy.

**Key Characteristics:**

- Long-term private rental tenants being displaced
- Fixed incomes unable to meet rising rental costs
- Limited housing options suitable for older adults
- Increased visibility in community locations

**Quotes:**

Older people at risk of homelessness due to rental increases has increased

Older people leaving private rental after many years. Unable to afford cost of current rents

**Analysis:** This represents a new demographic entering homelessness services, requiring age-appropriate responses and highlighting the inadequacy of aged care and disability support systems as housing safety nets.

### 5.4 Trend: First-Time Homelessness Experiences

**Trend Overview:** Increasing numbers of people experiencing homelessness for the first time, indicating a broadening of the crisis beyond chronic homelessness populations.

**Key Characteristics:**

- Previously housed individuals and families
- Rental arrears leading to evictions
- Cost of living pressures on working families
- Lack of familiarity with support systems

**Quotes:**

*We are seeing more people who have never experienced homelessness before reaching out*

*Presentation with notice to vacates due to rental arrears given rental increase*

*Families in paid employment also being impacted by rising living costs*

*More families presenting seeking assistance to save tenancies and experiencing homelessness*

**Analysis:** This trend indicates that homelessness is increasingly affecting mainstream populations rather than being limited to those with chronic vulnerabilities, suggesting systemic housing market failures.

### 5.5 Trend: Car-Based Homelessness Among Working Population

**Trend Overview:** Notable increase in people sleeping in vehicles, including those who are employed, representing a new form of hidden homelessness.

**Key Characteristics:**

- Working individuals using cars as accommodation
- Seasonal patterns linked to weather
- Day-time mobility maintaining employment
- Intersection with housing unaffordability

**Analysis:** This trend reveals how housing unaffordability is creating new forms of homelessness among the working population, challenging traditional assumptions about employment as a pathway out of homelessness.

## 5.6 Trend: Service Demand Exceeding Capacity

**Trend Overview:** Unprecedented demand for services creating significant wait times and capacity constraints across the homelessness service system.

### Key Characteristics:

- Full caseloads across services
- Waitlists for specialized programs
- Service closures due to demand

### Quotes:

*High levels of demand to access Entry Point services remain. The level of demand continues to outweigh the capacity of the IAP Team... Currently there are delays of 72+ hours to respond to the number of phone call enquiries being received*

*Demand is currently outstripping capacity to meet need*

*Detour seeing more referrals with 11 young people on the waitlist*

**Analysis:** The system is experiencing unprecedented strain, indicating both increased need and potential inadequacy of current service investment levels.

## 5.7 Trend: Complex Co-Occurring Mental Health and Substance Use

**Trend Overview:** Increasing presentations of clients with comorbid mental health and substance use disorders, creating challenges for service delivery and exit pathways.

### Key Characteristics:

- High-risk substance use combined with mental health issues
- Challenges accessing appropriate mental health services
- CATT service response limitations
- Limited specialized accommodation options

### Quotes:

*Have had an increase in comorbid mental health and high risk substance use. Has been presenting a challenge for staff (particularly 24/7 staff) in getting a response from CATT in relation to acute MH concerns because it is defined as a 'substance use issue'*

*We have observed an increasing number of clients experiencing mental health issues. Unfortunately, there are no mental health outreach services available to address the needs of homeless clients*

**Analysis:** The intersection of mental health and substance use issues is creating particularly complex presentations that existing services struggle to address adequately.

## 5.8 Trend: Interstate Migration and Housing Seeking

**Trend Overview:** Young people traveling interstate seeking housing and support services, indicating potential regional variations in service availability or housing markets.

### Key Characteristics:

- Interstate travel for housing opportunities
- Pressure on local service systems
- Potential lack of local connections and support

Quotes:

*Young people coming from interstate presenting for homeless and long term housing response*

**Analysis:** This trend suggests regional disparities in housing availability or service quality, leading to internal migration patterns that may strain receiving communities.

## **5.9 Trend: Digital Disconnection as Service Barrier**

**Trend Overview:** Emerging recognition of digital exclusion as a significant barrier to service access, particularly affecting people's ability to engage with increasingly online service systems.

Key Characteristics:

- Inability to complete online forms
- Lack of phones, data, or internet access
- Difficulty maintaining service contact
- Barriers to housing applications

Quote :

*Digital disconnection is emerging as a barrier, with young people unable to submit online forms or stay in contact with services due to lack of phones, data, or internet.*

**Analysis:** As services increasingly move online, digital exclusion is creating new barriers for vulnerable populations, potentially exacerbating existing inequalities.

## **5.10 Trend: Increased Women's Homelessness**

**Trend Overview:** Notable increase in women accessing drop in services

Key Characteristics:

- Higher proportions of women in service statistics
- Intersection with family violence experiences

Quotes:

*We have seen an increase in the number of women accessing engagement hubs. Over the year, 76% of people we have supported into housing via our CoC are women.*

*increase in rough sleepers, in cars, females, elder people*

**Analysis:** This trend may reflect increased vulnerability among women.

## **5.11 Trend: Extended Stays In Crisis Accommodation**

**Trend Overview:** Clients staying longer in crisis and transitional accommodation due to lack of exit pathways, creating system bottlenecks.

Key Characteristics:

- Months-long stays in refuge accommodation
- Lack of post-crisis housing options
- System capacity constraints
- Increased competition for limited housing

Quotes:

*Increased lengths of stay within refuge due to lack of options post refuge*

**Analysis:** Extended stays in crisis accommodation indicate fundamental failures in housing pathways and may be contributing to system capacity issues.

## 5.12 Cross-Cutting Patterns and System Implications

### Housing Affordability as Root Cause

Across all emerging trends, housing affordability emerges as the fundamental driver of demographic shifts in homelessness presentations. This is affecting:

- Traditional non-homeless populations
- Working individuals and families
- Older adults on fixed incomes
- Young people competing in rental markets

### Service System Strain Indicators

Multiple trends point to system capacity issues:

- Unprecedented wait times
- Full caseloads across services
- Service closures and reduced capacity
- Increasing complexity requiring specialized responses

### Age-Related Service Gaps

The data reveals particular gaps for:

- Very young people (15-17) requiring age-appropriate responses
- Older adults, including those needing aged care integration
- Young adults (23-25) falling between youth and adult services

### Mental Health System Integration Challenges

Consistent themes around mental health service gaps suggest need for:

- Outreach mental health services for homeless populations
- Better integration between homelessness and mental health systems
- Specialized responses for co-occurring disorders

## 5.13 Emerging Trends Analysis Conclusion

The emerging trends identified in this analysis paint a picture of a homelessness crisis that is both deepening and broadening. The demographic shifts toward much younger clients and older adults, combined with the increasing presentation of first-time homelessness among working populations, suggest that homelessness is becoming a mainstream housing affordability issue rather than a problem limited to traditionally vulnerable populations.

The unprecedented demand on services indicates that current service investments are inadequate to meet evolving needs. The increasing complexity of client presentations, particularly the rise in co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders, requires more sophisticated and integrated service responses.

Perhaps most concerning is the emergence of new forms of homelessness, such as car-dwelling among working populations and digital exclusion creating service access barriers. These trends suggest that traditional approaches to homelessness services may need fundamental reconsideration to address the evolving nature of housing insecurity.

The data strongly suggests that without significant policy intervention in housing markets and substantial investment in service capacity and integration, these emerging trends will continue to intensify, potentially overwhelming existing service systems and leaving increasingly diverse populations without adequate support.

The voices of service providers captured in this data provide clear evidence that the current homelessness service system requires substantial reform and investment to meet community need effectively and safely.

## 6. SHSN Recommendations

The results of the Southern Homelessness Services network Information Sharing Survey show a system in crisis. The trends and challenges identified in this report are common across Victoria, not just evident in Melbourne's South.

This report provides compelling evidence of a homelessness service system in crisis, requiring immediate emergency intervention and substantial long-term reform. The report demonstrates that current approaches are insufficient to address the evolving nature of housing insecurity and emerging trends in homelessness. The voices of service providers captured in this data provide clear evidence that the homelessness service system requires substantial reform and investment to meet community needs effectively and safely.

The homelessness crisis requires immediate emergency responses as well as long-term strategic planning and investment. Based on this analysis, the SHSN makes the following recommendations:

1. **A National Plan to End Homelessness** – integrated policy across government portfolios and across Federal, State and local governments is needed to end homelessness (see SHSN recommendations to the National Plan on page 2). This should be supplemented by a **Victorian Plan to End Homelessness**
2. **Sufficient funding to meet demand** for homelessness assistance – urgent investment in SHS to meet current demand
3. **Vastly greater investment in new social (preferably public) housing** across the Southern region to meet the demand, particularly in outer metropolitan areas, as a priority
4. Increased investment in effective **Housing First programs** and other evidence-based programs that combine stable housing with long term support services
5. **Permanent supportive housing** for those with the most complex needs
6. **Prevention and early intervention** to address newly homeless including people who are employed
7. **Dedicated pathways into new and existing social housing** for people experiencing homelessness – prioritise existing clients of SHS to access social housing
8. Implement **workforce initiatives** to retain and support staff
9. Support for **Advance to Zero approach to end rough sleeping** – expansion of this model across the Southern region is limited due to the lack of assertive outreach in all council areas and limited funding to support the model. This model should be expanded across all Southern councils to address rough sleeping
10. **Lived experience and expertise** – plans, policies and programs to end homelessness should draw on the lived experience and expertise of people who have experienced homelessness and used Specialist Homelessness Services using a co-production approach. SHS need to be resourced and supported to work with people with lived experience authentically.

**The Southern Homelessness Services Network makes the following recommendations to the National Housing and Homelessness Plan:**

**Recommendation 1.** The National Housing and Homelessness Plan should be a bold, comprehensive strategy that sets out a clear, committed and planned approach to ending homelessness in Australia.

**Recommendation 2.** The National Housing and Homelessness Plan should commit to clear targets, for example, to halve homelessness in five years and to end homelessness in ten years.

**Recommendation 3.** The National Housing and Homelessness Plan should focus on reducing poverty as a critical broad-ranging strategy to preventing and ending homelessness in Australia.

**Recommendation 4.** The National Housing and Homelessness Plan should focus on ensuring the supply of safe and appropriate public and community housing at the scale required to meet demand for people on the lowest incomes, including people experiencing, and at risk of, homelessness.

**Recommendation 5.** The National Housing and Homelessness Plan should ensure that the homelessness service system and workforce is well-resourced to provide flexible and responsive support to meet the actual demand for homelessness assistance.

**Recommendation 6.** The National Housing and Homelessness Plan should be responsive to the needs of different cohorts experiencing homelessness, whilst recognising and responding to intersectionality.

**Recommendation 7.** The National Housing and Homelessness Plan should include the provision of effective evidence-based models at the scale required, to prevent, intervene early and end homelessness, including authentic Housing First models.

**Recommendation 8.** The National Housing and Homelessness Plan should include strategies for all human services to take responsibility for supporting their service users at risk of/experiencing homelessness.

*From SHSN Submission to the Development of the National Housing and Homelessness plan 2023 read here - [776f42\\_6d09f72d3d0844729f23147d94ac6a11.pdf](#)*