



Whittlesea  
Community  
Connections



# Family Violence Housing Brokerage Evaluation Report

May 2022

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# Contents

## Executive Summary 4

## 1.0 Introduction 7

- 1.1 Program background & aims 7
- 1.2 FVHBP logic model 7
- 1.3 Scope of evaluation 7
- 1.4 Evaluation approach 7

## 2.0 Program implementation 9

- 2.1 Evolution of program 9
  - Program structure 9
  - Impacts of COVID-19 9
- 2.2 Services provided 9
  - Casework assistance 9
  - Issues addressed 10

## 3.0 Findings 11

- 3.1 Women access and engage with the FVHBP 11
  - Barriers to engagement 12
  - Factors supporting engagement 12
- 3.2 Outcomes for women 13
  - Women maintain stable & safe housing 13
  - Women and their children feel safe 13
  - Women are supported to engage with services 13
  - Women feel empowered and have agency 14
  - Women have improved mental health 14
  - Women upskill to re-/enter workforce 14
  - Client personas & journeys 14
- 3.3 Service challenges and system barriers to women’s recovery 15
  - Clarity around supports available 15
  - Lack of childcare support 15
  - Continued rental & financial stress 15
  - Lack of housing options 15

- 3.4 Relationship with FV services and real estate agencies 16
  - Awareness of the FVHBP and how to work within it 16
  - Increased knowledge of family violence & response 16
  - Communication, coordination and advocacy 17
  - Project value to FV sector in addressing housing support gap 17

## 4.0 Recommendations 18

## 5.0 Methodology 19

- 5.1 Evaluation Purpose 19
- 5.2 Data collection methods 19
  - Document review 19
  - Client interviews 19
  - Referring partner agencies focus group 19
  - Referring partner agencies’ survey 20
  - Real estate agents’ surveys 20
- 5.3 Data analysis and report writing 20
- 5.4 Limitations 20

## 6.0 Appendix - Client personas & journeys 21



WCC acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land and pay respects to Elders both past, present and emerging. WCC acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded and recognise the right to self-determination and continuing connection to land, waters and culture.

WCC acknowledge the strength and resilience of adults, children and young people who have experienced family violence, and recognise that it is essential that responses to family violence are informed by their experiences and advocacy. WCC pay respects to those who did not survive and acknowledge friends and family members who have lost loved ones to this preventable and far-reaching issue.



# Executive Summary

## Project background & aims

Whittlesea Community Connections (WCC) established the Family Violence Housing Brokerage Program (FVHBP) pilot in May 2019. The FVHBP provides intensive housing support, advocacy, and recovery case planning for women victim survivors of family violence. The FVHBP aims to support victim survivors in accessing and/or maintaining private rental tenancy. Additionally, the project seeks to address barriers victim survivors experience in accessing the family violence and housing service sector.

The evaluation used mixed methods to document the operation and evolution of the FVHBP, to assess its effectiveness and to identify recommendations for strengthening the FVHBP.

## Project implementation

### Casework assistance provided

The FVHBP assisted 117 women between May 2019 and March 2022. On average, each FVHBP client had:

- 5.85 casework sessions
- 3.95 hours of casework support
- 10 issues addressed

In terms of housing rental assistance, the FVHBP provided:

- 14 women with FVHBP interest free loan
- 17 women access to rent in advance and/or rent assistance from Haven Home Safe
- 4 women access to bond loan through the Department of Health and Human Services

### Issues addressed

The FVHBP assisted women to address 1,200 issues. Alongside housing, the FVHBP assisted women to address the below key issues:

- Personal and family safety
- Financial and material wellbeing
- Mental health

## Outcomes for women

### Women access and engage with the FVHP

The FVHBP assisted **117 clients with 147 dependent children**.

- 70% were receiving Centrelink benefit and 4% had no source of income
- 60% at risk of homelessness and 15% were homeless
- 46% reported a disability
- 41% sole parent with dependent children
- 26% spoke a language other than English as the main language at home
- 9% were under 25 and 3% were over 65 years old
- 2% identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander

The evaluation identified the following as the **main barriers** to women engaging with the FVHBP:

- Women in high-risk situation requiring immediate accommodation to escape the family violence
- Complexity of women's needs, requiring support through periods of crisis
- Women receive many other supports, with other services involved, and feel overwhelmed
- Inflexibility of rental inspections, requiring women to attend in person and at specific times
- Readiness and priority to move to private rental

The evaluation also highlighted **factors that help women engage** with the FVHBP:

- Prompt and easy access for women
- Broad project eligibility criteria
- Understanding and supportive caseworkers
- Collaboration with referring FV caseworkers

### Women maintain safe and stable housing

6 women assisted through the FVHBP were interviewed. Some women described how the rental assistance loans and relief grants helped them **maintain their current safe accommodation**, and for others the bond and moving cost loan helped them **leave their unsafe accommodation** and access private rental.

### Women and their children feel safe

Women interviewed shared how the FVHBP helped them, and their children feel safer. The assistance to relocate to an area unknown to the perpetrator, the stability the financial assistance provided, the knowledge of supports available and feeling supported helped **increase women's sense of safety**.

### Women are supported to engage with services

Women interviewed reported they were supported with their initial engagement with other services. FVHBP caseworker often liaises with other services to make warm referrals and facilitate women's access to services.

However, the level of trauma and fear to their safety women experience means clients at times **struggle to engage with other supports**. Additionally, services often provide limited timeframes for supports and lack of options to re-engage, not meeting the needs of **women who require flexibility from services** to enable their engagement.

### Women feel empowered and have agency

Some women interviewed expressed impact the FVHBP had on their sense of empowerment and independence. Through the process of **building knowledge, agency and sense of hopefulness for their future**, without the continued experience and fear of violence.

### Women have improved mental health

Many of the women interviewed shared that the FVHBP assistance helped them **feel supported, hopeful for the future and reduce their levels of stress** around finances, which helped to improve their mental health. However, some of the women described how they are still dealing and managing mental health issues and trauma from the abuse experienced, recognising that it is a **long journey of mental recovery for them and their children**.

### Women upskill to re/enter the workforce

Most women assisted were unemployed when they first came into the service. As part of women's recovery from the impacts of the family violence, some women felt ready and **motivated to re-enter or enter the workforce for the first time**.

### Service challenges and system barriers to women's recovery

#### Clarity around supports available

Due to the level of trauma women experience and number of services they may be in contact with, some of the women feel overwhelmed, report **continued lack of clarity around supports available for them** and not retaining this information.

#### Lack of childcare supports

Some of the women interviewed expressed that the lack of childcare support available for them, has been a **barrier in maintaining their employment, upskilling and/or re-entering the workforce**.

#### Continued rental and financial stress

Majority of the women interviewed expressed continued financial stress, particularly as most women's main source of income was Centrelink, or had casual and part-time employment. Women described at times **needing further financial support to meet their basic living costs**.

#### Lack of housing options

The lack of local affordable housing options is a key systems barrier for women's recovery from family violence. This includes the under resourced and overstretched social housing sector, with **no local social housing access point for the City of Whittlesea**, closest being Preston, and continued lack of supply of social housing.

The lack of local affordable housing options is a key systems barrier for women's recovery from family violence.



## Relationship with FV services and real estate agents

### Awareness of the project

#### Local FV services

The FVHBP information sessions and consultations with FV practitioners have assisted to raise awareness of the FVHBP within the local FV services. The FVHBP has had an **increase in referrals and pathways**, currently 3-4 per week in comparison to 1-2 per week in 2020.

12 practitioners across FV services and organisations who refer to the project were surveyed. **7 out of 12 respondents stated they had a clear understanding of the FVHBP.** This was further supported by focus group responses of key staff across referring partners, who feed back that staff across their organisations had clear understanding of the project. However, practitioners' responses also highlighted that there **remains some unawareness of the project** particularly across new staff.

#### Real estate agents

Initially, FVHBP project leads attempts to engage local real estate agents in information sessions on understanding family violence and the project was met with strong resistance. To address this the project caseworker undertook **advocacy on an individual level with the local real estate agents.** This engagement has helped to **build rapport with local agents, gain their interest in the FVHBP** and to participate in information sessions on family violence.

2 real estate agents who FVHBP project lead had engaged were surveyed. The 2 respondents stated they had a clear understanding of the FVHBP. However, there is a **continued lack of understanding of the project** within the local real estate agent sector.

## Understanding of family violence and response

FVHBP project leads delivered training to real estate agents on understanding and responding to family violence. 4 real estate agents attending the session completed poll after the information session. All respondents:

- Reported **increased knowledge and understanding** of what family violence means
- Felt **'confident' or 'very confident' to recognize signs** that someone is experiencing family violence
- Felt **more equipped to support women and children experiencing family violence** to obtain private rental properties and linking to other local support service

## Communication, coordination and advocacy between agencies

Practitioners from local FV services and organisations surveyed, reported positive working relationships with the FVHBP.

- 10 out of 12 respondents were **satisfied with the lines of communication between their agency and the FVHBP**
- 7 agreed the **communication and referral processes were clear and efficient**
- 10 agreed the **coordination of client support between their agency and FVHBP was positive and effective**

FV caseworkers further described how the collaboration between local FV services and FVHBP facilitated the **combining of limited resources to better meet clients' needs** and the **advocacy to local real estates enabled women's access** to private rentals. However, FV caseworkers acknowledged the **limitation of having a sole FVHBP caseworker** due to the high demand for housing support and intensive advocacy required.

## Project value to family violence sector

FV caseworkers across local FV services stressed the value of the FVHBP in addressing housing needs for victim survivors of family violence. With **local FV services not having capacity and/or funding to support women to access safe and stable housing.**

## Recommendations

The evaluation findings point to the following recommendations for the FVHBP:

1. Provide access to respite and occasional childcare for clients
2. Build a network and establish referral pathways with local companies required for relocating
3. Provide further and ongoing education, information sessions and promotion of the project
4. Expand & broaden the FVHBP by recruiting specialist caseworkers to
5. Build relationships with the Real Estate Institute of Victoria
6. Advocate for better access to social housing for victim survivors of family violence

# 1.0 Introduction

## 1.1 Program background & aims

Family Violence Housing Brokerage (FVHB) is a pilot project established in May 2019, funded by the Ian Potter Foundation until June 2022. The project aims to support women and their children who have experienced family violence in accessing and/or maintaining private rental tenancy. By assisting victim survivors with property searches, inspections, general education on renting, access to a no-interest-loan, referral pathway to supports and recovery case planning.

Additionally, the project seeks to address barriers victim survivors experience in accessing the family violence and housing service sector. By advocating and building relationships with local family violence services and estate agents, as well as supporting women with the navigation of those systems.

## 1.2 FVHBP logic model

The FVHBP logic model was developed internally by Whittlesea Community Connections (WCC) FVHBP project leads. The logic model summarises the program's key inputs, outputs (activities and participation) and the short- medium- and long-term outcomes the program intends to bring about for women. In addition, the logic model outlines the changes the project hopes to realise in its work with local family violence services and estate agents. This evaluation is guided by the FVHBP logic model. See Figure 1 (Over page).

## 1.3 Scope of evaluation

This evaluation seeks to understand the extent to which the project was implemented and operating as intended and extent to which the project met its intended outcomes. To assess its effectiveness and to identify recommendations for strengthening the FVHBP. Additionally, the evaluation seeks to present evidence in support of the continuation of the program (if appropriate) beyond the current funding period.

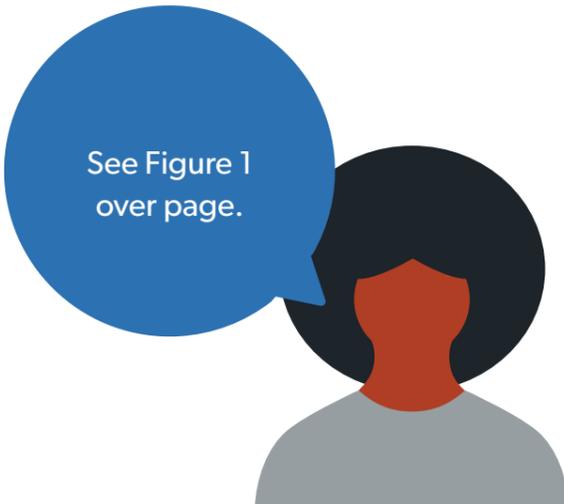
The evaluation covered the FVHBP operations from 1 May 2019 to 31 March 2022.

The evaluation seeks to answer the following evaluation questions:

1. To what extent was the project implemented and operating as intended?
2. To what extent did women who experienced family violence have access to and engaged with the project?
3. To what extent is the project producing the intended medium and long- term outcomes for women?
4. To what extent has relationship between WCC, family violence services and local estate agencies strengthened?
5. What are the barriers and enablers to the successful implementation and effectiveness project?
6. To what extent is there evidence to support the continuation of the program beyond the current funding period?
7. What changes (if any) are required to strengthen equity of access and quality of outcomes of the project?

## 1.4 Evaluation approach

The evaluation is guided by the FVHBP logic model and used qualitative and quantitative methods to answer the evaluation questions. This included review of key project documentation, appraisal of project delivery statistics, interviews with clients, referring partners survey and focus group, real estate agents survey and reflection meetings with WCC project leads and worker. Full details of the methodology are described in section 5.



See Figure 1 over page.

**The project:** The Family Violence Housing Brokerage Project aims to support women and children whom have experienced family violence in accessing and/or maintaining private rental tenancy. Furthermore, the project seeks to address barriers in accessing the family violence and housing service sector for women and children and support with the navigation of these systems. Support is provided with access to a no interest loan for rent in advance, bond, removalist and whitegoods. In addition, casework support includes initial holistic assessment, tenancy assistance and education, rental readiness assessment, financial literacy education, referral pathway support and recovery case planning.

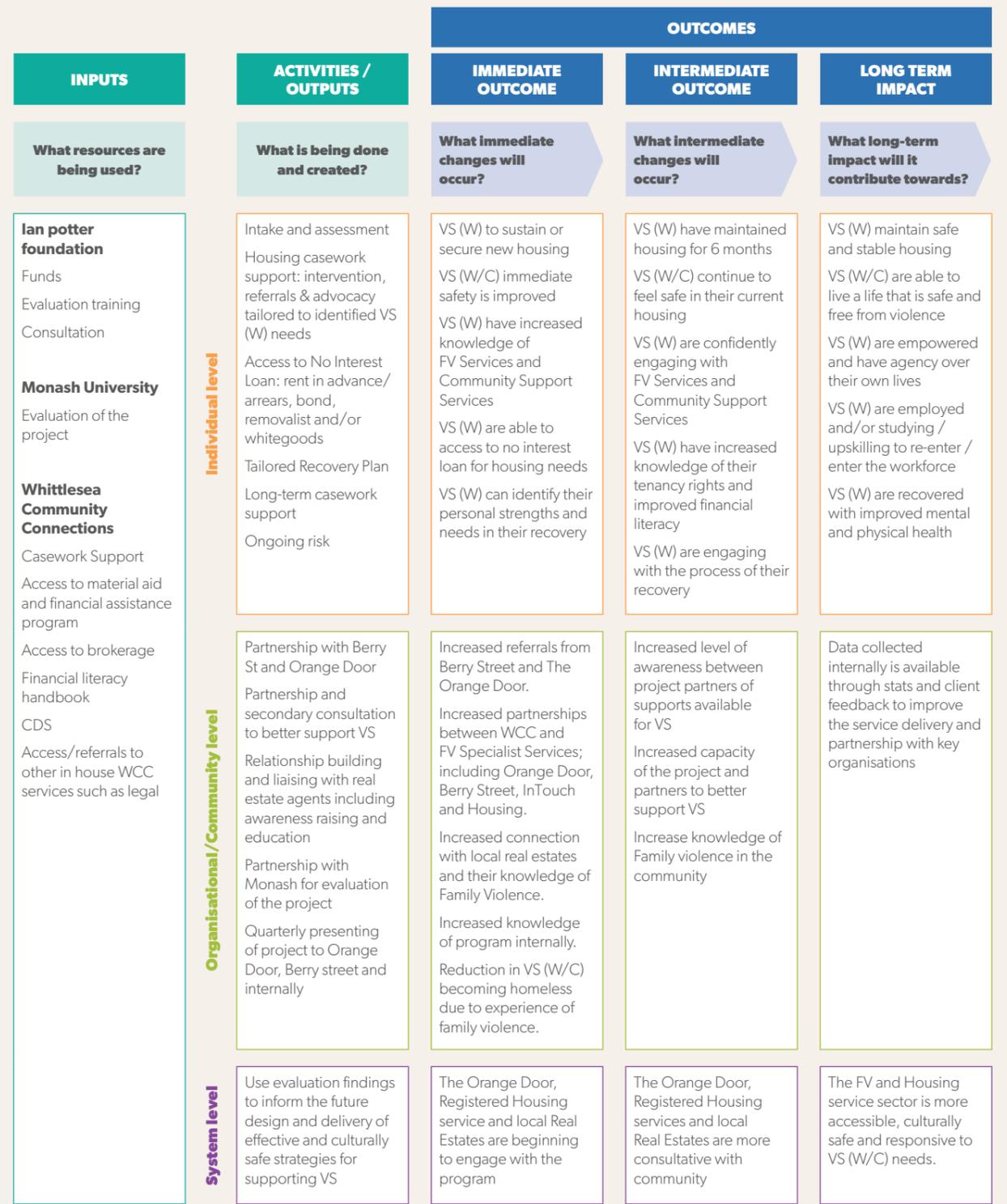


Figure 1: FVHBP program logic model.

# 2.0 Program implementation

## 2.1 Evolution of program

### Program structure

Throughout the implementation of the project, the service has had structural and staffing changes. From the commencement of the program until mid-2020, the project was led by a sole part-time caseworker. In 2020 due staff changes, impacts of the pandemic and to improve program reach, 5 WCC caseworkers were trained to work on the project alongside other projects and service responsibilities. However, the project required sole responsibility from caseworkers to progress and strengthen relationships with FV services, real estate agents and improve reach. From mid-2021, this resulted in changing back staffing structure to sole caseworker leading the project on a full-time basis.

### Impacts of COVID-19

The pandemic had a significant impact on women's access to the program. With the service receiving lower number of referrals during the COVID-19 restrictions, as women experiencing family violence had less opportunities to safely reach out to services. While the FVHBP caseworkers were able to provide assistance remotely during the COVID-19 restrictions, this also had an impact on the service's ability to engage women safely.

Since 2021, there has been an increase in referrals to the program as COVID-19 restrictions lifted and through the ongoing liaison with the local FV services. FVHBP project leads reported higher demand for services across all areas of supports, including housing, financial assistance and mental health. Further describing an increase in complexity of clients' needs, who often require intensive and holistic supports.

Recently, this has also been met with less availability of private rentals. With less houses appearing in the market and landlords being more hesitant to approve houses for single mothers. This has meant it is taken longer for women to get approved for properties, particularly those with larger families. This has also led to an increased amount of advocacy needed from FVHBP caseworker, who advocate to local real estate agents for clients' access to private rentals.

## 2.2 Services provided

### Casework assistance

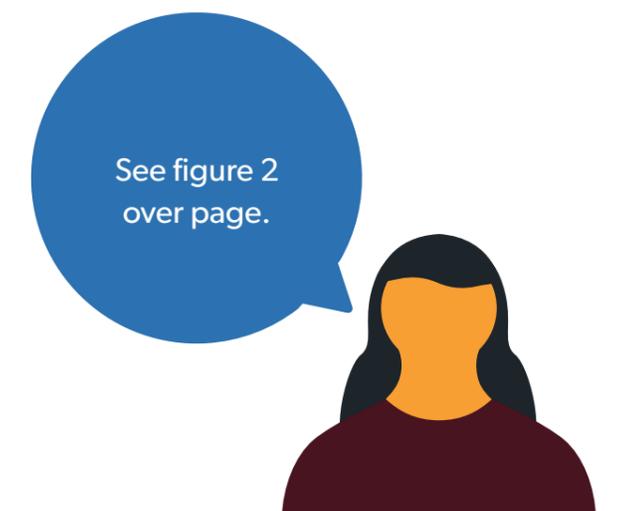
The FVHBP has assisted 117 women between May 2019 and March 2022. In terms of housing rental assistance, this included:

- 14 women provided with FVHBP interest free loan for rental bond, rent, removalist and/or purchasing white goods.
- 17 women assisted to access and provided with rent in advance and/or rent assistance from Haven Home Safe
- 4 women assisted to access and provided with bond loan through the Department of Health and Human Services

The average number of casework sessions provided to FVHBP clients, 5.85, is significantly higher than the average number of casework sessions provided through WCC generalist casework service, 3.43. The average hours of casework support provided per client, 3.95 hours, is also significantly higher than the average hours provided per client through WCC generalist casework service, 1.87 hours.

Additionally, the amount hours provided per FVHBP client is an underrepresentation of the actual amount of support provided to clients. This number does not take into account the hours spent communicating and coordinating with other services, attending care team meetings and advocating to real estate agents for clients' access to private rentals.

FVHBP project leads described the vast majority of clients (4 out of 5) requiring intensive supports and advocacy navigating the FV service systems. This is due to the level of trauma and financial hardship women experience, their unstable and unsafe current housing and barriers they face accessing private rentals.



## 2.0 Program implementation continued

Figure 2 below highlights amount of FVHBP casework assistance provided for women.

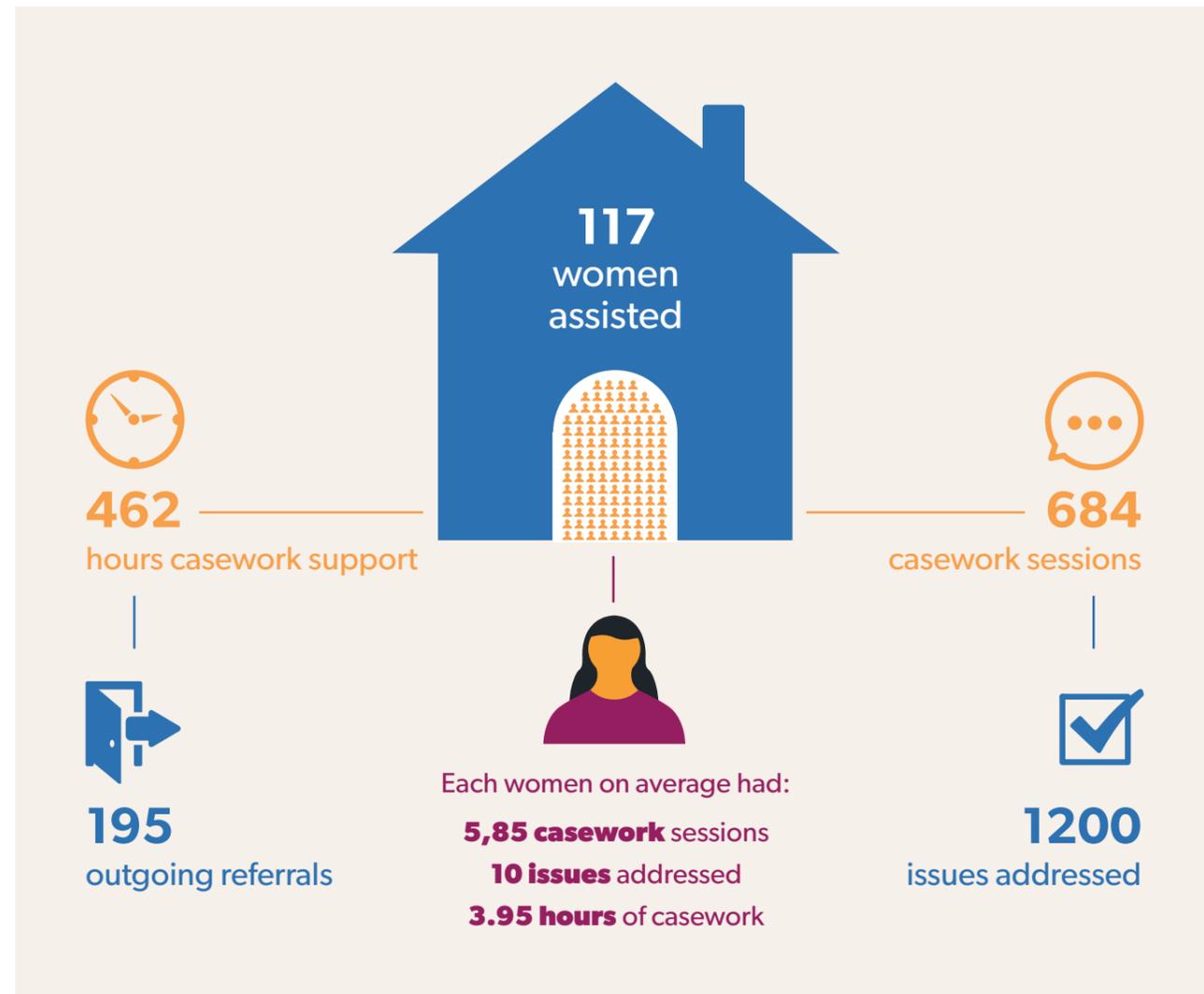


Figure 2: FVHBP casework assistance provided for women

### Issues addressed

As highlighted in figure 2, the FVHBP assisted women to address a total of 1,200 issues. Alongside housing, vast majority of key issues addressed involved:

- Personal and family safety
- Financial and material wellbeing
- Mental health

The assistance provided around these key issues is further reflected in the outgoing referrals, with most frequent referrals to:

- WCC Financial Assistance program
- Haven Home Safe
- Queens Fund
- WCC Legal Service
- Big Group Hug<sup>1</sup>
- ADRA<sup>2</sup>
- Berry Street
- Kildonan Financial Counselling

<sup>1</sup> Big Group Hug respond to the immediate material needs disadvantaged children and their families

<sup>2</sup> ADRA provides food provisions for families in crisis

## 3.0 Findings

### 3.1 Women access and engage with the FVHBP

The FVHBP assisted **117 clients with 147 dependent children** between 1 May 2019 to 31 March 2022.

Figure 3 below highlights the demographics of clients assisted.

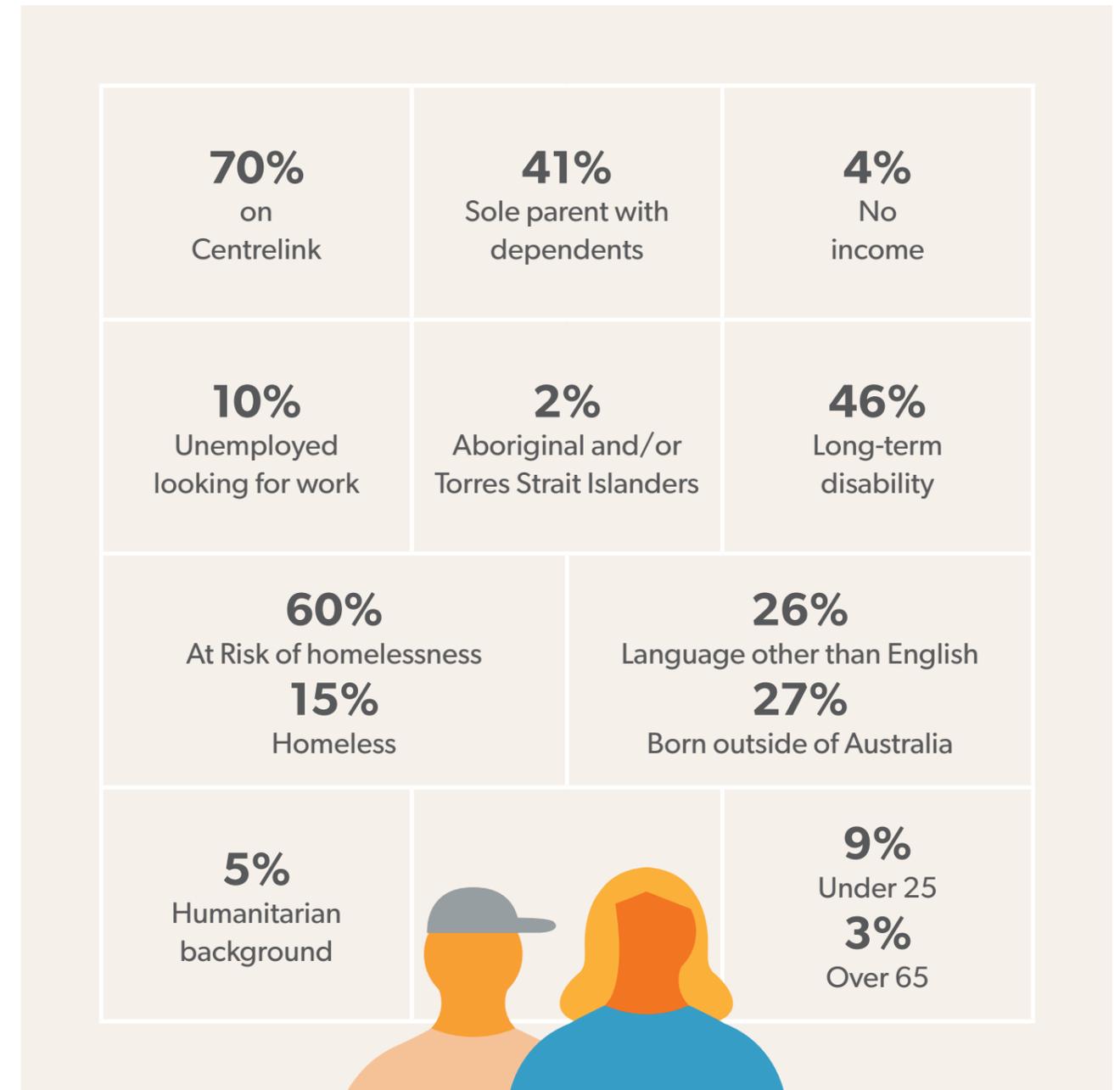


Figure 3: Demographics of FVHBP clients.

### 3.0 Findings continued

#### Barriers to engagement

Through the clients' interviews, referring family violence caseworkers' focus groups and project leads reflections the following were identified as main barriers to women engaging with the FVHBP:

- **Women in high-risk situation requiring immediate accommodation**

Often women referred to the program from the established referral pathways between local FV agencies and the FVHBP are in high risk of FV situations. Women in high-risk situations are eligible to the program. However, through the FVHBP it could take 4-6 weeks to find private rental thus not appropriate to meet the needs of women requiring immediate accommodation to escape the family violence.

- **Complexity of women's needs**

Due to the enduring impacts of family violence, such as high levels of trauma and financial hardship, many of the women referred have complex needs. At times, clients go through periods of mental health crises requiring hospital admissions as well as substances use as way to cope with the trauma. In such cases the support provided by FVHBP caseworker focuses on assisting women through the crisis, liaising with other services involved in client's care. Due to the ongoing complexity of clients' needs, some clients are unable to engage in the housing support FVHBP provide and at times disengage with the FVHBP.

“ It (mental health) is something I have to deal with. I have no family and no one. Because of the whole trauma I saw a psychologist but was not really helpful, I was in a bubble then I didn't see anyone, my life was ugly.

- **Too many other supports and services involved**

It was reported that some women already have a team of support people, such that adding another was overwhelming. Similarly, women may receive many referrals and feel overwhelmed and unsure about who they have and have not contacted, especially when they have only spoken by phone. The trauma and periods of crises women experience impacts their capacity to engage with a whole range of different services. Particularly, as often services operate in silos providing discrete supports to victim survivors of family violence.

“ So overwhelmed with lots of numbers

“ Lots of services working for her, it was bit much for her

- **Inflexibility of rental inspections- face-to-face and specific times**

Many clients do not have their own transport and have young dependent children. Additionally, clients on temporary visas, such as student visas, do not have access to childcare. This means it is difficult for them to attend rental inspections on particular times and often real estate agents require women attend face-to-face inspections.

“ It's been difficult for her attend the inspections on a time that suits, with getting babysitting and transport arranged.

- **Readiness and priority to move to private rental**

It was reported that when working alongside victim survivors of family violence, it is important to meet women where they are at in terms of their recovery. At times that means that although FV services may see clients' need to move as a priority, clients may not be ready or see it themselves as priority. This leads to some women disengaging with the FVHBP.

“ The person using violence went into prison. And I think she had this sense like it's okay now, it's not such an urgent thing to move. And now he is has come out of prison and is breaching again.

#### Factors supporting engagement

Clients and referring family violence caseworkers interviewed for the evaluation highlighted numerous factors that help women engage with FVHBP assistance:

- **Prompt and easy access for women**

Most clients interviewed reported quick and easy access to the FVHBP when they first needed housing help. Many of the women described no waiting time for the appointments and prompt assistance.

“ Straight way they answered and made an appointment with me.

“ They saw me straight way and helped with me arrears

- **Broad eligibility criteria**

Referring FV caseworkers reported how the broad eligibility criteria of the FVHBP facilitated the access of women on who often have barriers to services due to their visa status.

“ Even for women on different visas it's not a barrier, still accepted to the program

- **Understanding and supportive caseworkers**

Clients highlighted how being able to speak to supportive and understanding female caseworker with expertise in family violence and local services, helped them to engage.

“ They were understanding, calming me down telling me everything they can do

“ She talks very friendly told me about situation as single mum, she was telling how it was for her, the story for her motivated me

- **Collaboration with referring FV caseworkers**

FV caseworkers making the referrals to the FVHBP are highly trusted by their clients, such that when they promote the FVHBP and vouch for the value of the service, women trust that recommendation facilitating their engagement. Additionally, a referring FV caseworker described how sharing information on how best to engage specific clients further supported their engagement.

“ I promote the program with the women... I collaborate with (FVHBP caseworker), would give her some further information how the client does engage, just some ways to try to keep her engaged

### 3.2 Outcomes for women

From February to March 2022, 10 women who were supported through the FVHBP were invited to participate in client interviews to explore their experiences of the service and impact the program had. 6 of the 10 women invited, consented and participated in the client interviews.

#### Women maintain stable & safe housing

Clients interviewed described how the FVHBP assisted them to maintain stable and safe housing. For some women the rental assistance loans and relief grants helped them pay their rent arrears and utilities bills to **maintain their current safe accommodation**. For women needing to leave their current area, the bond and moving cost loan **helped them leave their unsafe accommodation**, as known to the perpetrator of family violence.

“ Really helped with the arrears... vouchers for food and electricity bills, relief grant was good

“ Because of the family violence I had to leave my area, you guys helped me leave Epping

With one client describing how they would have not been able to move without the financial assistance the FVHBP provided, highlighting the **lack of other local housing supports for victim survivors** of family violence.

“ I was able to find a property that I got approved for...I would have not been able to move without their help in the first place like financially. I do not know what I would have done

#### Women and their children feel safe

Clients interviewed were asked whether the support they received helped them and their children feel safe. Some clients reported the assistance to relocate to an area unknown to the perpetrator was **crucial for their and their children's safety**. Additionally, for many clients the stability the financial assistance provided helped their sense of safety.

“ Physically (safe) yes, we really enjoy living where we are, happy with the area. My ex-husband does not know where we are and we have been here nearly 6 months

“ Yes I feel safe, with the financial support

Clients also shared how their increased knowledge of services and supports available for victim survivors helped them **feel supported and not alone, increasing their sense of safety**.

“ I know there is those services out there that are there to help out, there is someone out there

#### Women are supported to engage with services

All the clients interviewed reported they were supported with their initial engagement with other services. FVHBP caseworker described that women are provided with the information and choice to contact services themselves, if and when they feel confident and able to do so. Often, however, due to the level of trauma women are experiencing, FVHBP caseworker liaises with other services directly to make warm referrals and facilitate women's access to services.

“ (FVHBP caseworker) put in touch with food bank service, haven home, food vouchers, fuel voucher

The level trauma and fear to their safety women experience also means clients at times struggle to engage with other supports they may need, as shared by some of the interviewed clients.

“ They (FVHBP) did ask me about what other supports, I would have like to see someone about rental laws but I was a bit of mess when I first spoke to them (FVHBP)

“ It’s still a lot you know when going through family violence situation and don’t feeling safe in your own house, it’s really hard with the pressure of contacting all these people and sending out emails trying to get everything lined up so you can leave

Clients also shared how they experienced lack of follow up from other services and when they were provided with supports from other services this was often for a short timeframe. This highlights key systemic barriers in services that support victim survivors of family violence. With the limited timeframes and lack of options to re-engage with services, not meeting the needs of **women who require flexibility from services to enable their engagement** with supports when they feel able and safe do so.

“ She did referral and people call me once and that is it

“ She (Social service caseworker) came out a couple of times spoke with me and my daughter... closing the case, cannot rely on someone to be there for us it’s sad, helped out twice

**Women feel empowered and have agency**

Some of the women expressed the impact of the program had on their sense of empowerment. Through the process of **building knowledge, agency and sense of hopefulness for their future**, without the continued experience and fear of violence.

“ I was fearful, ‘how am I going to do this?’ They gave me information on how and now I understand. You know what to do, it’s been good.

“ Knowing that there was more for me, I could have a future without any abuse or trouble it was hope, they give you strength, you can do other things in your life

A client also described how the support they received to find and move to a safe place to live for themselves and their child, was **instrumental in their sense of independence**.

“ I buy everything fresh for myself, this is all mine. First time I live on my own, I was independent

**Women have improved mental health**

Many of the women interviewed described how the rental assistance, relief and other financial assistance they received through the FVHBP, helped **reduce their levels of stress and anxiety around finances**. Additionally, women shared how the FVBHP helped them feel supported and hopeful for the future, which also helped to improve their mental health.

“ Helped with a month’s rent, help me relax and not stress. I suffer from bad anxiety, helped me to not to panic

“ Made you feel there was future a way out, mentally in the better place

Some of the women described how they are still **dealing and managing mental health issues and trauma** from the abuse experienced, recognizing that it is a long journey of mental recovery for them and their children.

“ We still get down a lot, I still get down, I suffer really bad anxiety all of my children desperately need counselling

**Women upskill to re-/enter workforce**

The vast majority of women assisted were unemployed when they first came into the service. As part of women’s recovery from the impacts of the family violence, some women felt ready and **motivated to re-enter or enter the workforce for the first time**.

“ (FVHBP) helped me to get a work resume and the experience of work... and for me to get a job

“ She told me about the driving lessons... I don’t work and I have to work, everything is costly. All I need now to get a car and get a job. I’m doing a disability course most like get job from it

**Client personas & journeys**

Through workshops and interviews with FVHBP project leads, three client personas and their journeys were unpacked. Amy, Lorna and Leila personas and journeys are an amalgamation of numerous clients’ stories and their experiences through the project. These illustrate the complexity of victim survivors needs, intensity of assistance provided and the impact of the project on clients’ safety and recovery (see Appendix pg. 24- 26).

**3.3 Service challenges and system barriers to women’s recovery**

**Clarity around supports available**

Through the client interviews, some of the women reported continued lack of clarity around supports available for them. FVHBP caseworker described providing the information to women in various forms, including written, and over the course of their engagement. However, particularly due to the level of trauma women experience and number of services they may be in contact with, some of the **women feel overwhelmed and do not retain this information**.

“ If they (FVHBP) told that they can help other ways for food vouchers, home appliances help but so overwhelmed with lots of numbers

“ I don’t know what you guys offer

Additionally, one of the women reported lack of clarity from the FVHBP on ending rental leases due to family violence and needing to re-locate. This meant the client had to negotiate with the landlord, who requested a month’s notice.

“ I would have liked to get out sooner. It was quite scary still being in the same suburb. I didn’t want to leave my house, I didn’t want to go outside not even to the letter box so that’s a hard thing having to wait with the notice. I think that needs to be clearer, so (FVBHP) staff know what the rules are

The FVHBP has recently made connections with the Consumer Affairs Victoria Tenancy Assistance and Advocacy Program, who provide information to caseworkers and clients on rental tenants’ rights who are experiencing family violence. FVHBP caseworker reported recent changes to policies and awareness from real estate sector enabling tenants to leave and break their lease without a notice period.

**Lack of childcare support**

Some of the women interviewed expressed how lack of childcare support has been **barrier for them to upskill and re-/enter the workforce**. One of clients also shared they were unable to maintain their employment due to their shift work schedule and lack of support, preventing her access to childcare.

“ Being traffic controller, its shifts, early and different finishing times so taking him to childcare is hard. Had to leave the job.

**Continued rental & financial stress**

Vast majority of the women interviewed shared their continued financial stress. Particularly for women whose main source of income was Centrelink payments, as well as for some women on casual and/or part-time employment. With many women describing at times **needing further financial support to meet their basic living costs**.

“ Like now sometimes it will be good if I had that extra help... I pay \$17\$\$ rent there, I still need help with food and with rent, a lot of stress

“ The problem is all my payments are going in rent and bills and with the baby its hard. When I get job it will be better but it’s hard now

“ It did help me when I was in arrears then... but It’s just the one time, when the rent comes, the food and clothes.. some months I just need a little bit of help

**Lack of housing options**

A further key systems barrier for women’s recovery from family violence is the lack of local affordable housing options. This includes the under resourced and overstretched social housing sector, with no local access point for the City of Whittlesea, closest being Preston, and continued lack of supply of social housing.

“ They (FVHBP) tried to help, the problem is there is no (social) housing workers you can directly get connected to... there needs to be more open doors

“ So grateful for being able to move and I know there is no interest in the loan, but I’m paying \$24 a fortnight. It’s very confusing I had (FV agency) worker tell me that you are now paying to keep your children and safe, doesn’t seem fair I had no choices.



#### 3.4 Relationship with FV services and real estate agencies

##### Awareness of the FVHBP and how to work within it

###### Local FV services

Since 2020, FVHBP project leads have **delivered 5 information sessions to casework teams** from Orange Door, Berry Street and Uniting care. FVHBP project lead has also promoted the program to staff across other local services who support victim survivors of family violence, such as Anglicare, Juno and Haven Home Safe.

The information sessions and consultations with staff have assisted to raise awareness of the FVHBP, build on the relationships with the local FV services and referral pathways. As a result, the FVHBP has had an **increase in referrals and pathways**, currently 3-4 per week in comparison to 1-2 per week in 2020.

In February 2022, teams from local FV services and organisations who refer to the project were invited to participate in a staff survey. 12 staff across Orange Door, Berry Street, Anglicare, Uniting Care and CVGT took part in the survey. **7 out of 12 respondents stated they had a clear understanding of the FVHBP**, with 3 answering 'Not sure' and 2 stated they did not have a clear understanding of the project.

Additionally, key staff across referring partners were invited to take part in a focus group. 3 staff from Berry Street, Orange Door and WCC Financial Assistance Program participated in the focus group. There was general consensus that staff across their organisations had clear understanding of the project, describing knowledge transference within their organisations to new staff.

“ They are generally aware, maybe new practitioners might not know straight away but then when encounter issues everybody will know

“ I started in November and February when a client was looking for private rental, my team leader highlighted it

However, as highlighted in the survey responses there **remains some unawareness of the project** particularly across new staff. Additionally, the survey and focus group feedback highlighted questions around service capacity and eligibility criteria.

“ I think maybe more could be done for workers in my program to be across the project particularly as we have a number of new staff

“ Great to know how many referrals you would accept and when you are taking more, as I'm never really sure when I can refer

“ Lack of information on capacity/ intake process/ referrals and eligibility..What if they are planning on moving to a different suburb or LGA?

###### Real estate agents

Since the commencement of the project, FVHBP project leads have attempted to engage local real estate agents to provide information sessions on understanding Family violence and the project. Initially, there was strong resistance to this as local estate agents felt it was not of any interest or relevance to their work.

To address this the project lead undertook advocacy on an individual level with 10 local real estate agents. Educating them around family violence and the project. This engagement has helped to build rapport with local agents and gain their interest by explaining how FVHBP and WCC services can assist tenants that may present with issues.

In February 2022, local real estate agents who FVHBP project lead had engaged with were invited to participate in a survey, 2 real estate agents completed the survey. The 2 respondents stated they had a clear understanding of the FVHBP. However, there is a continued lack of understanding of the project within the local real estate agent sector.

##### Increased knowledge of family violence & response

The ongoing relationship building and engagement with the local real estate agents has assisted clients in accessing the market and in gaining interest from the local real estate agent to participate in information sessions on family violence.

In November 2021, **FVHBP project leads delivered training to real estate agents** on understanding and responding to family violence, with 4 real estate agents attending the session. All attendees completed a short poll after the information session, which highlighted the positive impact the training had on their knowledge.

All respondents stated the **training increased their knowledge and understanding** of what family violence means

All respondents felt **'confident' or 'very confident' to recognize signs** that someone is experiencing family violence

All respondents felt **more equipped to support women and children experiencing family violence** to obtain private rental properties and linking to other local support service

“ This is new to me and I personally don't deal with this side of our business but the information and education on Family Violence has been great at the information sessions

#### Communication, coordination and advocacy

Through the referring partner survey and focus group, staff across local FV services and organisations reported positive working relationships with the FVHBP.

- 10 out of 12 respondents were 'very much' or 'mostly' **satisfied with the lines of communication between their agency and the FVHBP**
- 2 were 'somewhat' satisfied
- 7 out of 12 agreed the **communication and referral processes were clear and efficient**
- 5 were 'not sure'
- 10 out of 12 agreed the **coordination of client support between their agency and FVHBP was positive and effective**
- 1 was 'not sure' and 1 did not agree

“ Always had an excellent response to my referrals. Always good communication and collaboration!! A great program!! And always had positive feedback from clients

A FV caseworker further described how the collaboration between local FV services and FVHBP facilitated the **combining of limited resources to better meet clients' needs**.

“ We are limited but working together and pulling our resources we can better assist the clients

Additionally, FV caseworkers highlighted the value and **importance of FVHBP advocacy to local real estates to enable women's access to private rentals**.

“ Some clients have poor/minimal rental history and the family violence has usually impacted this. They often report struggling to be accepted or not able to complete applications. FV housing brokerage projects helps to assist with this

“ The advocacy with real estates that is something that victim survivors need, other services do not have that capacity

However, FV caseworkers acknowledged the **limitation of having a sole FVHBP caseworker** due to the high demand for housing support and intensive advocacy required. Also, to further strengthen the relationships with real estate agents and facilitate women's access to private rentals.

“ There is only one case manager and its huge amount of work, having another case manager, the need is that huge, big responsibilities for one worker – you will only be able to do a certain amount, not going to cover everything you need to cover

“ If they are on Centrelink, or low income how they are going to compete with other applicants with double working income. They have to speak with the real estates, the amount of advocacy that goes into this, there is a need for more than one person

#### Project value to FV sector in addressing housing support gap

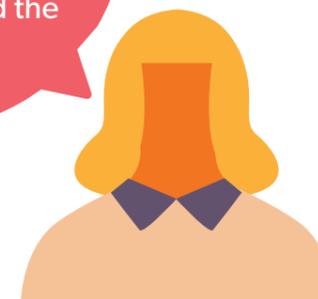
FV caseworkers emphasized, through the focus group and survey, the value of the FVHBP in addressing housing needs for victim survivors of family violence. With **local FV services not having capacity and/or funding to support women to access safe and stable housing**.

“ There is a huge gap where women and children are experiencing homelessness as a result of FV. The Orange Door is not funded to provide housing support so a lot of the time women will come to us but their main needs are around housing... That is why we are so grateful for WCC and housing support programs with a FV lens, there is such a need for it and such a huge gap.

“ Our housing program is limited and does not support seeking a private rental

“ It's a better option for clients than referring them to our local housing service. They get a very personalised service.

10 out of 12 respondents were 'very much' or 'mostly' satisfied with the lines of communication between their agency and the FVHBP



## 4.0 Recommendations

The evaluation findings point to the following recommendations for the FVHBP:

### 1. Provide access to respite and occasional childcare for clients

- a. to support women to attend housing inspections, study, upskill and/or re/enter the workforce, as well provide needed respite. Particularly for women who do not have access to free childcare, such as clients on temporary visas.

### 2. Build a network and establish referral pathways with local companies required for relocating

- a. to provide clients with recommendations (e.g., removalist, carpet cleaners) and facilitate direct liaising between FVHBP and the companies reducing burden on clients.

### 3. Provide further and ongoing education, information sessions and promotion of the project

- a. With real estate agents (understanding FV, impacts and their role in response)
- b. With FV services particularly to new staff (intake and eligibility).

### 4. Expand & broaden the FVHBP by recruiting specialist caseworkers to

- a. Engage and provide outreach/targeted supports for priority clients
- b. Strengthen relationships with and advocacy to real estate agents
- c. Increase client intake through local FV services.

### 5. Build relationships with the Real Estate Institute of Victoria

- a. to understand and build on their FV training resources
- b. to foster and recognize internal leaders/champions and create pathways between FV response and real estate sectors.

### 6. Advocate for better access to social housing for victim survivors of family violence

- a. Work in partnership with local housing and FV services to advocate for local and direct access to social housing support.



## 5.0 Methodology

### 5.1 Evaluation Purpose

This evaluation was commissioned by WCC to document the operation of the FVHBP, to assess its effectiveness and to identify recommendations for strengthening the FVHBP.

The evaluation was designed to answer the following key questions:

1. To what extent was the project implemented and operating as intended?
2. To what extent did women who experienced family violence have access to and engaged with the project?
3. To what extent is the project producing the intended medium and long-term outcomes for women?
4. To what extent has relationship between WCC, family violence services and local estate agencies strengthened?
5. What are the barriers and enablers to the successful implementation and effectiveness project?
6. To what extent is there evidence to support the continuation of the program beyond the current funding period?
7. What changes (if any) are required to strengthen equity of access and quality of outcomes of the project?

The evaluation covered the FVHBP operations from **1 May 2019 to 31 March 2022**.

### 5.2 Data collection methods

This evaluation employed mixed methods. Data collected from different Project stakeholders was triangulated to test the validity of the data and answer the key evaluation questions as fully and confidently as possible.

#### Document review

The evaluation reviewed the following key project documents:

- FVHBP logic model
- FVHBP progress reports
- Project delivery statistics (including services and client demographic data)

#### Client interviews

Purposive sampling was used to invite women who were supported through the FVHBP and assessed by Project caseworker as safe and appropriate to contact.

Project caseworker initially provided clients with information about the purpose and voluntary process involved in the client survey. For clients who indicated willingness to participate, project caseworker sought clients consent to provide their contact details to the Evaluation consultant. Evaluation consultant contacted the clients to explain further the purpose, provide opportunity to ask questions and arrange a time to conduct the interview over the phone.

6 of the 10 women invited consented and participated in the semi-structured interview over the phone. Clients were provided with \$50 voucher by WCC as a reimbursement for their time. Interviews were recorded and transcribed in full for analysis.

#### Referring partner agencies focus group

Purposive sampling was used to invite key staff from referring partner agencies, who were involved with the FVHBP to participate in the evaluation. A focus group was conducted with **3 practitioners** from referring partner agencies:

- Orange Door- Specialist Family Violence Practitioner x 1
- Berry Street- Senior Specialist Family Violence Practitioner x 1
- WCC- Financial Assistance Program Coordinator x 1

With referring partitioners' permission, the focus group (conducted by videoconference) was recorded and transcribed in full for analysis.

## 5.0 Methodology continued

### Referring partner agencies' survey

All practitioners from referring partner agencies were invited to take part in an anonymous online staff survey. To understand practitioners' perspective on the impacts of the project on women supported, as well as on their organisation and identify areas for improvement.

**12 practitioners** across referring partner agencies completed the survey:

- Orange Door x 7
- Berry Street x 2
- Uniting Care x 2
- CVGT- YConnect x 1

### Real estate agents' surveys

Real estate agents who attended the family violence information session delivered by FVHBP project leads, were invited to complete a poll at the end of the survey. The poll assessed the impact the information session had on their understanding of family violence and response. **4 real estate agents** completed the poll.

Local real estate agents who FVHBP project lead had engaged with were also invited to participate in a survey. To gauge the impact the project had on the real estate agents' understanding and response to family violence, and identify areas for improvement. **2 real estate agents** completed the survey.

### 5.3 Data analysis and report writing

Interview and focus group data were analysed for themes using ATLAS.ti 22 software<sup>3</sup>. Survey data were analysed by using Microsoft Excel. A draft of the evaluation report was reviewed by WCC. Feedback was incorporated into the final version of this report.

### 5.4 Limitations

Findings are presented in summary form, with only key results and learnings extracted from the data. Further details and nuance may be obtained with deeper analysis.

The client interview findings should be considered to represent the experience of those who were able to engage in the program and may not accurately reflect the views of participants who experienced significant challenges in engaging with the program.



## 6.0 Appendix - Client personas & journeys

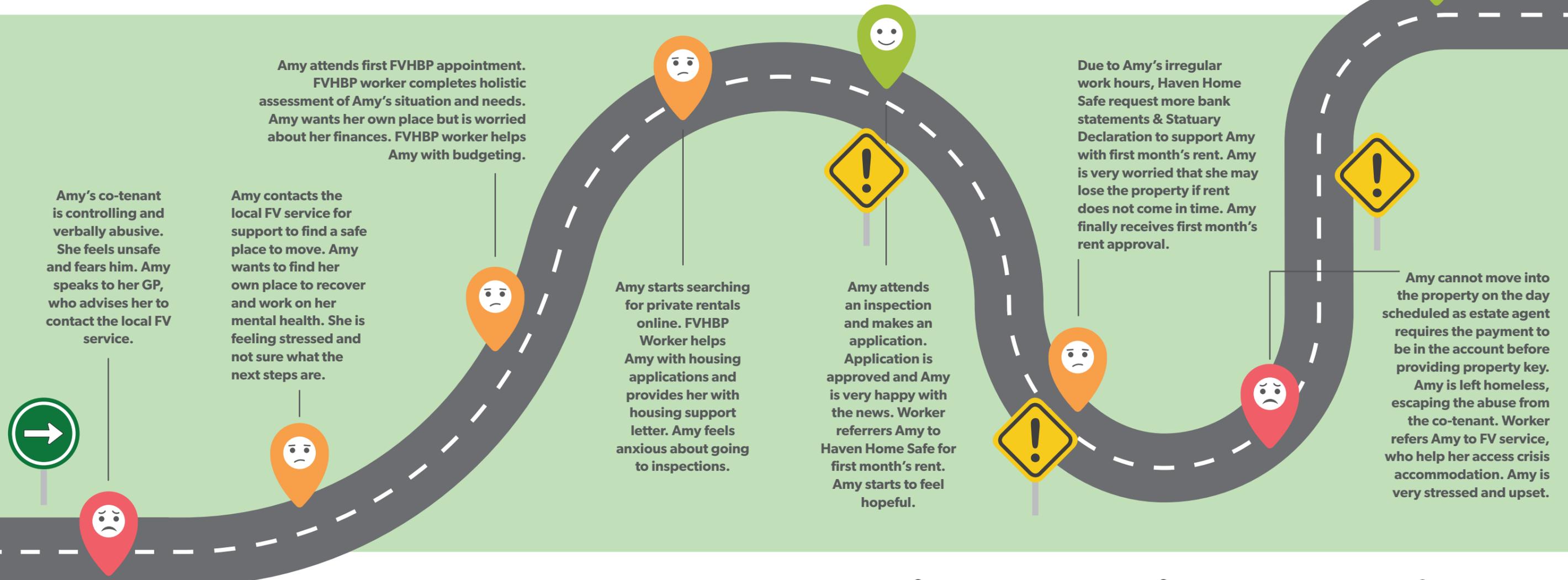
<sup>3</sup> Specialist software for qualitative data analysis



## AMY Background

Amy is in her mid 50s, born in Australia. Amy has experienced a long history of physical, emotional and verbal abuse perpetrated by her ex-partner and her family. Amy left her ex-partner escaping the family violence and moved with her family where the abuse continued. She suffers with physical and mental health issues. Amy works part-time, COVID-19 has impacted her work and is now working less hours. She is single and has an adult son. Amy is currently living in shared accommodation.

**Amy finally gets key to the property and moves to safe property to recover from the FV she experienced.**



### → OPPORTUNITIES & ⚠ CHALLENGES

- GP trust & rapport  
Appropriate response from GP.
- FV service aware of FVHBP & refer Amy.
- FVHP worker receives referral & promptly arranges appointment.
- FVHP worker connects with estate agents and provides information on the FVHBP.

⚠ Landlord worries around property damages due to FV.

→ FVHBP worker advocates and raises awareness FV and recovery.

⚠ Over stretched local Housing service, difficulty in coordinating support. Lots of follow up & advocacy needed from FVHBP worker.

⚠ Lack of flexibility from real estate agents and understanding of FV, advocacy needed from FVHBP worker.

→ Previous contact with FV service easier to access again for further support.

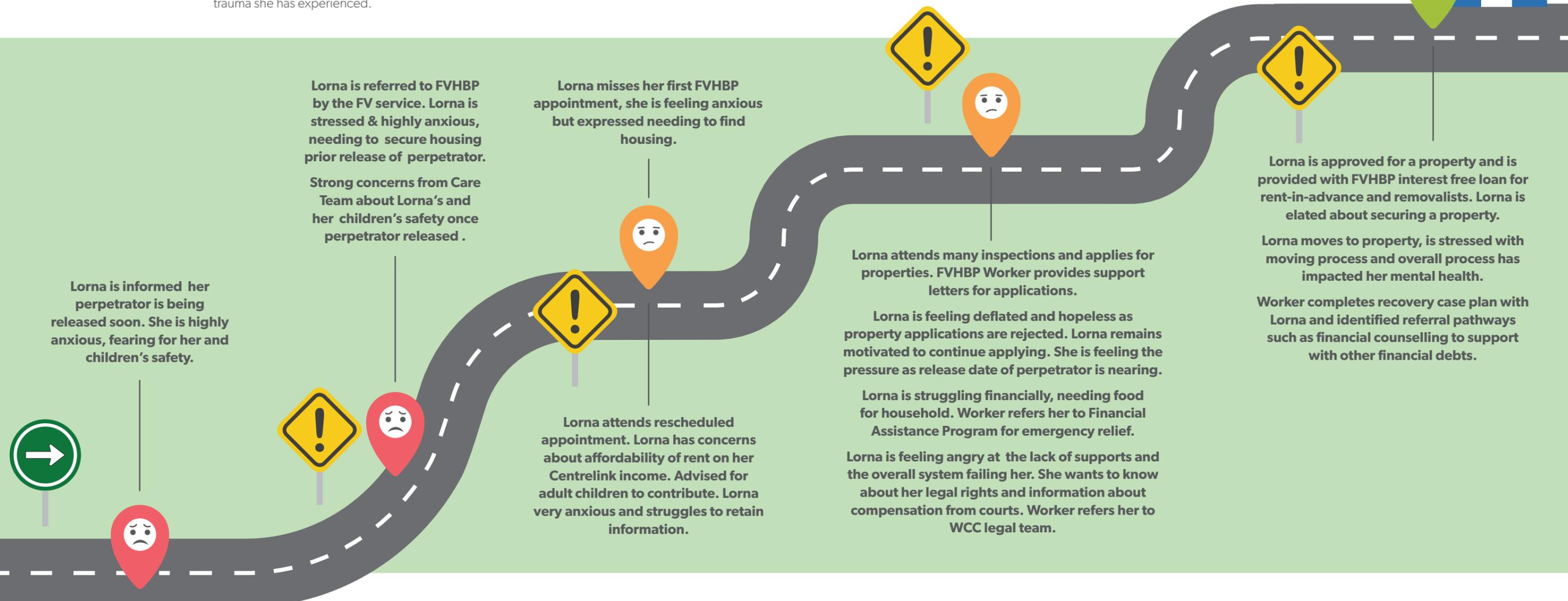


## LORNA

### Background

Lorna is in her late 30s years, born in Australia. Lorna is a sole parent of two young adult children. Lorna and her children experienced significant and long history of family violence perpetrated by her ex-partner and father of her children. Lorna has a history of child protection involvement and is supported by FV services. The ex-partner is in prison and is being released. Lorna's current address is known to her ex-partner and is not affordable. Lorna is receiving Centrelink benefits and has high debts from rent arrears, utility and high school fees. Her mental health has deteriorated from the trauma she has experienced.

Lorna has sense of hopefulness for the future and her recovery.



Lorna is informed her perpetrator is being released soon. She is highly anxious, fearing for her and children's safety.

Lorna is referred to FVHBP by the FV service. Lorna is stressed & highly anxious, needing to secure housing prior release of perpetrator.

Strong concerns from Care Team about Lorna's and her children's safety once perpetrator released.

Lorna misses her first FVHBP appointment, she is feeling anxious but expressed needing to find housing.

Lorna attends rescheduled appointment. Lorna has concerns about affordability of rent on her Centrelink income. Advised for adult children to contribute. Lorna very anxious and struggles to retain information.

Lorna attends many inspections and applies for properties. FVHBP Worker provides support letters for applications.

Lorna is feeling deflated and hopeless as property applications are rejected. Lorna remains motivated to continue applying. She is feeling the pressure as release date of perpetrator is nearing.

Lorna is struggling financially, needing food for household. Worker refers her to Financial Assistance Program for emergency relief.

Lorna is feeling angry at the lack of supports and the overall system failing her. She wants to know about her legal rights and information about compensation from courts. Worker refers her to WCC legal team.

Lorna is approved for a property and is provided with FVHBP interest free loan for rent-in-advance and removalists. Lorna is elated about securing a property.

Lorna moves to property, is stressed with moving process and overall process has impacted her mental health.

Worker completes recovery case plan with Lorna and identified referral pathways such as financial counselling to support with other financial debts.

### → OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES

→ FV services already linked in with Lorna. Short time frame to secure housing prior the release of the ex-partner.

→ FVHBP works collaboratively with Care Team with ongoing risk assessment and support.

⚠ High-risk and crisis situation.

→ Lorna has transport to inspect properties, has knowledge of applying for rentals and good rental history.

⚠ Lorna's mental health can impact her ability to attend rental inspections.

→ Potential VOCAT claim and compensation to cover psychologist costs and holiday for the family.

⚠ Rental properties limited & receiving rejections on applications.

→ Securing housing helped Lorna complete and engage with recovery case plan.

⚠ Perpetrator is high-risk of continuing family violence; Lorna's safety is ever changing even with address unknown to perpetrator.



## LEILA Background

Leila is in her mid 20s and from Iran. Leila's main language is Arabic, she has limited English. Leila arrived in Australia from Iran in 2016 with her husband. Leila has two young children, aged 3 & 5. Leila lives with her husband who is controlling and violent. Leila experiences physical, verbal, psychological and financial abuse perpetrated by her husband. Leila has no family in Australia.

**Leila now works in childcare and her children are doing well in school.**

**Leila is very proud of her achievements from where she started. She wants to work and support other women with similar experiences to her.**



Leila takes her youngest child to kindergarten twice a week. Kinder worker has concerns as Leila looks scared, worried and seems isolated.

Kinder worker introduces Leila to FVHBP outreach worker at the kinder. Leila has no awareness of supports available, is confused about the systems, does not want to involve police and is fearful that her husband will find out she is talking someone.

Leila starts to engage with FVHBP worker at the kinder. The kinder becomes a safe space for Leila, as her husband does not know she is getting support.

Leila is scared to leave her husband, fearing her and her children's safety. She is also worried her children will be taken away, having no money nor place to live.

FVHBP worker helps Leila open a bank account. Leila is supported to access emergency relief and legal advice at the kinder. Leila feels supported and trusts the kinder and the FVHBP workers.

Leila starts to build confidence, feeling more independent. She is still scared to make decision to leave, remains fearful of her husband finding out.

Leila tells a member of her husband's family she is getting some support. Her husband finds out and physically assaults Leila.

Leila calls FVHBP worker very scared. She is very fearful for her safety. Worker calls police and police attend her home. Leila is very distressed recounting what happened. The police apply for FV intervention order, removing the perpetrator from the home.

Leila is worried not knowing what will happen to her and her children, how to pay for food and rent. Worker supports Leila to access Centrelink payments, emergency and rent relief.

Leila is approved for a property and is provided with FVHBP interest free loan for rent-in-advance, removalists and white goods. Leila moves and feels safer.

Leila begins to plan for her and her children's future and starts a childcare course. Leila feels more independent, confident and hopeful for the future.

Leila does not feel safe in the house and too many bad memories. The rent is also not affordable.

FVHBP worker helps Leila to apply for properties and provides her with housing support letter.

### → OPPORTUNITIES & ⚠ CHALLENGES

→ Outreach at Kindergarten and staff awareness of FVHBP and supports available.

→ Flexibility of WCC legal and ER services to provide outreach in the kinder.

⚠ High risk situation, all support provided without husband's knowledge.

→ Fear and lack of trust towards police.

⚠ Strong rapport with FVHBP worker facilitated access to police and safety.

⚠ Access to childcare for Leila's youngest child, allowing her to study.

→ Continued risk to her safety as address known to perpetrator.

