



The Saturday Paper

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NEWS

With an unaffordable rental market and long waitlists, women escaping domestic violence are acutely vulnerable. But projects to develop underutilised council land may hold the key to the crisis, with long-term economic benefits. By *Cate Sumner*.

Tasmania searches for solutions to house vulnerable women



Core Collective Architects' design for Hobart Women's Shelter. CREDIT: CORE CREATIVE

On Christmas Day, Rachel Wake was killed. Police allege the Hobart midwife was stabbed to death by her former partner in front of her two teenage children.

For decades Wake helped thousands of couples bring life into the world. The tributes to her and support for her children have been heartfelt and moving.

The shock of her murder added urgency to a meeting held this week to focus on family violence and on meeting the challenge of housing at-risk women and children across Tasmania. Hosted by the state's governor, Barbara Baker, it was a landmark gathering to define the next steps in increasing permanent housing units in Tasmania for women leaving family violence or who are otherwise homeless.

Cate Sumner is an international human rights lawyer based in Hobart and director of Law & Development Partners.

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“Safety, security and connection to nature are all embedded in the design and are of heightened importance for women and children who have experienced trauma.”

“Promoting women’s independence and decision-making is critical,” Baker, who has spent her life in legal and judicial work centred on family law, told representatives of government, philanthropy and business at the meeting. “Housing for women and their children can provide them with some independence.”

The scale of need in Tasmania is particularly alarming and urgent. Since the Covid-19 pandemic began, the number of women who phone the Hobart Women’s Shelter seeking emergency accommodation has doubled. In the past 18 months, 73 per cent of these women were turned away because there was no space - 1351 women and children from just one shelter. This is more than double the national rate.

“When I first started six years ago we were receiving 60 calls a month from women needing shelter and for the last year it has averaged almost 400 calls a month,” said Janet Saunders, chief of the Hobart Women’s Shelter. “Hobart now has one of the most unaffordable rental markets in the country and the waitlist for priority housing is now well over a year. Women coming to our crisis accommodation units are now staying for much longer as there are no exit points into permanent housing.”

The nexus between family violence and homelessness is important. Equity Economics’ “Nowhere to Go” report, released last year, showed family violence is the primary reason women and children seek specialist homelessness services. Despite this, only 3.2 per cent are currently receiving long-term housing. The report also presented economic modelling that showed building 16,000 houses for at-risk women and children would result in a twofold economic benefit as well as contributing significant longer-term budget savings for health and other services.

In response, the Hobart Women’s Shelter has embarked on a project to increase the number of permanent housing places for women and children facing homelessness. With support from the Isabel Sims Endowment, the shelter is working to develop a prototype for a house that uses rapid assembly and other methods to ensure precision around construction time and costs.

The aim is twofold. In the short term, the shelter wants to double the number of housing units from 25 to 50. In the medium term, it’s advocating a significant injection of funds for permanent housing units for women and children, to be built across one or more locations in Tasmania in the next decade.

In late 2019, as part of a Churchill Fellowship, I began investigating collaborative funding models to support Tasmania’s first health justice partnership. The Hobart Women’s Shelter was a logical partner, with most of the women approaching the shelter after experiencing family violence.

Just six months later, the Covid-19 pandemic made plain in Tasmania what was apparent elsewhere around Australia and the world - that family violence is the “shadow pandemic”, as UN Women aptly named it.

This month, Tasmania’s first Health Justice Partnership begins, a project that bases specialist family violence lawyers at selected health clinics and women’s shelters across the state. The service will also trial phone and other remote delivery of services. In other Australian states these partnerships have successfully delivered protection to women and their children when they are most at risk, by being present at the places women go when they need help. In Tasmania the partnership is managed by Women’s Legal Services Tasmania and Tasmania Legal Aid.

Among the challenges facing women’s shelters in Tasmania is the scarcity of land zoned for housing. At this week’s meeting, Erin Dolan, the program manager for homelessness and affordable housing at the Lord Mayor’s Charitable Foundation in Melbourne, described the model that powers the Townhall Avenue development in Preston, in which philanthropic bodies partnered with councils to locate and develop underutilised land. By building over car parks or around existing council buildings such as libraries, additional affordable housing units have been constructed while retaining existing council facilities. A long lease then forms the basis of a social housing development that is well placed in the heart of a community and close to a range of health, education and employment services.

“The Townhall Avenue development showed how philanthropy could provide an incentive for councils to select the best situated land for an affordable housing project,” Dolan said. “This model of combining philanthropic grant funds with a long lease of council land, leveraging in other funding and finance, received a 2020 Australian Philanthropy Award as it was an innovative response that can be replicated through a land donation or lease from charities including faith-based organisations, businesses or not-for-profits.”

Another approach involves integrating affordable housing in large urban developments. James Henry, the general manager of housing projects at Housing Choices Australia, described funding models where affordable and disability housing units form up to 20 per cent of projects, such as the Queen Victoria Market redevelopment in Melbourne and Nightingale Housing developments in Victoria and South Australia, with the remainder being sold and attracting a diverse range of residents.

In Hobart, the redevelopment of the University of Tasmania’s property in Sandy Bay is also a model that will include a varied profile of residents. The initial master plan has slated up to 250 of the 2500 homes as “attainable”. The Macquarie Point redevelopment is another opportunity to include affordable homes for a varied cohort of women, including women with disabilities and older women.

At this week’s meeting, Jeanette Large, chief executive of Women’s Property Initiatives, presented the Older Women’s Housing Project in Melbourne, which was recently completed and showcased significant donations of services and materials, including from Studio Bright architects and Brickworks.

In Tasmania, two architecture firms, Core Collective Architects and Christopher Clinton Architect, are contributing their expertise by working with staff and clients at the Hobart Women’s Shelter to understand exactly what women prioritise in a permanent home. “Trauma-informed design has been integral to the way we have approached the brief for the Hobart Women’s Shelter,” says Emily Ouston of Core Collective. “Safety, security and connection to nature are all embedded in the design and are of heightened importance for women and children who have experienced trauma.”

The Victorian projects presented at the meeting this week highlight how recent innovative housing projects have relied on significant philanthropic grants and corporate donations, alongside government funding. Indeed, the largest development focusing on housing woman and children escaping family violence is Launch Housing’s Family Supportive Housing Project in Dandenong, and it relied on a number of philanthropic donors to reach the point of breaking ground. One family donated \$1.2 million to the project after a significant profit from the sale of their home in Melbourne.

The message from this week’s meeting was that the safety of women and their children can be addressed in a more sustained and holistic way when quality housing is combined with early intervention from women’s legal and justice services and health services. Funding integrated, affordable housing and health services partnerships will not only save lives but is fundamental to women and their children having a pathway to education and opportunity, as well as a sense of home and belonging within a community.

How the story ends for at-risk women and children in Tasmania in need of permanent housing will depend on sustaining these conversations for the next decade to deliver the fundamental elements of land, grant-funding and access to long-term and low-cost finance. For them, and all families in need across Australia, the future depends on harnessing the power of philanthropic, business and government support to women’s housing.

National Sexual Assault, Domestic and Family Violence Counselling Service 1800 737 732

This article was first published in the print edition of The Saturday Paper on Feb 12, 2022 as “Developing independence”.

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