

# Changing Nowhere to Go in Tasmania: A Health, Justice Housing Partnership

Cate Sumner with Janet Saunders, Chief Executive Officer of the Hobart Women's Shelter, Yvette Cehel, Chief Executive Officer of Women's Legal Services Tasmania and Kristen Wylie, Acting Director of Tasmania Legal Aid

*'When I first started seven 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. 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.'*

— Janet Saunders,  
Chief Executive Officer  
of the Hobart Women's Shelter

This is the story of the start of Tasmania's first Health Justice Partnership that commenced in January 2022 and a project that will see two prototype two-bedroom homes built in the first half of 2023 as a pilot looking at optimal design and construction processes to increase permanent housing for women and children in Tasmania.

We reflect on what we have learnt in the last three years, how we came to connect our work across health, law, access to justice and housing and why secure housing is literally the foundation from which women and children can access justice and health support.

## 2020 — A Global Pandemic

In December 2019 the world watched the pandemic unfold in China. By March 2020 Australia had closed its borders and in April 2020 lockdowns were being introduced across the country that would remain a feature of life for another two and a half years.

UN Women announced family violence as the shadow pandemic. Financial stress and dislocation all compounded to render women and children already experiencing family violence more vulnerable. Many were unable to seek assistance but

remained confined within the home with the perpetrator of the violence.

The last two and a half years has seen over 3,100 women and children approach the Hobart Women's Shelter seeking crisis accommodation with almost 2,500 of them turned away from the Shelter as there is no space and nowhere for the current occupants to move as rent prices across Tasmania increase to record levels.

As the pandemic unfolded the lockdown created the time to speak with dozens of health justice partners, housing providers, financiers, philanthropists across Australia to learn more about how they had crafted their services.

Experience globally and within Australia shows that women are more likely to approach health and social services when experiencing family



violence and talk with staff they trust and have developed a rapport with.

The key concept behind health justice partnerships is to make it easy for women to seek legal advice at the services that they already visit on a regular basis such as their doctor, child nurse, housing or child and family services. The integration of services means it is not an extra visit that needs to be scheduled into a day and it will not draw attention to the fact that a woman may be seeking help.

Conversations with child health nurses, GPs, paediatricians, and child and family learning centre staff indicated that family violence was ever present. However, in these conversations the medical profession did not realise that women and children experiencing family violence could seek legal assistance without charge from legal services like Tasmania Legal Aid or Women's Legal Services Tasmania. As the discussions evolved, health partners began to see how a Health Justice Partnership could assist

*'One in five women experience family violence in the 12 months after giving birth. A Health Justice Partnership in Tasmania can make a real difference in two ways. Firstly, at the Right Now moment when a doctor or nurse is told that there is family violence and, while the woman is still with them, a health worker is able to ring the Health Justice lawyer to seek their assistance. Secondly, there are some women who desperately hang on to the idea that things will get better, and the violence will stop. Later, when the violence continues, and they're worried for themselves or their baby, they often reflect and approach the health service to link them to the lawyer.'*

— Tasmanian Paediatrician.

## 2021 — Funding a Health Justice Housing Partnership and Permanent Housing for Women

As the second pandemic winter commenced, funding was secured in June 2021 for Tasmania's first Health Justice Partnership — Just Healthy Families. The Tasmania Community Fund with additional Commonwealth funding committed to support three family violence specialist lawyers working at 14 locations across

Tasmania. The health and social service partners include the Hobart Women's Shelter, Child and Family Learning Centres and the Child Health and Parenting Services.

Women's Legal Services Tasmania and Tasmania Legal Aid are co-managers of Just Healthy Families, and all health and social service partners contribute to the governance arrangements through the monthly meetings of the Health Justice Partnership Steering Committee.

Tasmania's Just Healthy Families is the first state-wide Health Justice Partnership in Australia, and also the first to combine the skills of a specialist women's legal service and a generalist legal service that can also offer services to men and boys.

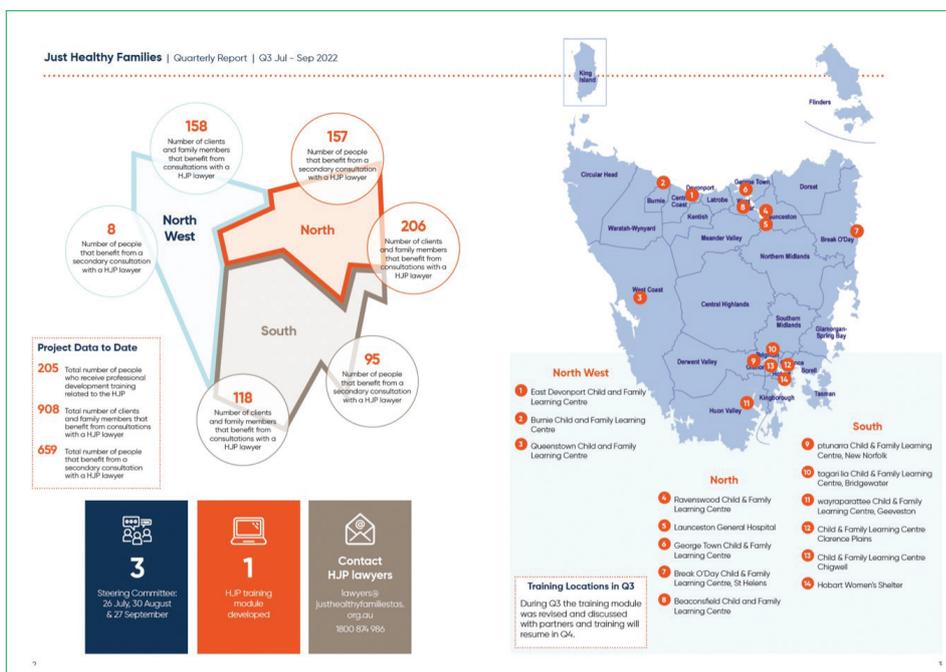
At the same time, the Hobart Women's Shelter collected its first year of data on unique women and children that were being turned away from the shelter due to a lack of space. For the first time, in 2020–2021 the Hobart Women's Shelter data revealed the shocking reality that eight out of 10 women and children seeking assistance were turned away. This is the highest percentage of women turned away from crisis accommodation of any state in Australia and is more than double the national figures. These statistics reflected those who knew to ring the Hobart Women's Shelter with demand for crisis accommodation in Hobart probably significantly higher.

It was clear that building more crisis accommodation was not the solution and that permanent homes were needed for women and children leaving violence or who are otherwise facing homelessness.

Through the Perpetual Trustees Impact Grant process, the Isabel Sims Endowment provided funding to enable the Hobart Women's Shelter to work with architects to design a two-bedroom home with the needs of women and children leaving violence as a key design consideration as well as an exploration of prefabricated building techniques to reduce on-site construction time. Core Collective Architects with Christopher Clinton Architects were selected to work with the Hobart Women's Shelter on the design. Emily Taylor, associate at Core Collective explains that: *'Trauma informed design has been integral to the way we have approached the brief from the Hobart Women's Shelter. Safety, security, connection to nature, are all embedded in the design and are of heightened importance for women and children who have experienced trauma.'*

## 2022

January 2022 sees two lawyers starting in the north and the south of Tasmania to circuit to the Just Healthy Families partner locations. A third lawyer commences working in the north-west of Tasmania in May 2022. By the end of September 2022, the Just Healthy Families service has assisted over 900 women and children through direct consultations with



specialist family violence lawyers with the numbers of people assisted doubling every quarter. In addition, hundreds of conversations have taken place between the JHF lawyers and staff working in the health and social service partners.

In the words of Vicki the Centre Leader at the Queenstown Child and Family Learning Centre:

*Where [the Just Healthy Families initiative] is having the most impact is with our families experiencing family violence.*

*We know it is really important for our families to be able to access legal advice however we know that they simply would not travel to see a lawyer in Burnie or Hobart for many reasons.*

*The cost of petrol is quite a lot for families here, families don't drive don't have good vehicles and there is certainly not access to consistent public transport.*

*But even if they were able to make it to a lawyer's office it is not the sort of environment that really inspires trust for them. So here, they trust us and by extension they trust the Just Healthy Families lawyer. So really to sum it up, Just Healthy Families is helping to keep our families safe, and it is re-establishing their trust in the legal system.*

On 8 February 2022, the Honourable Barbara Baker, Governor of Tasmania co-hosted with the Hobart Women's Shelter a meeting at Government House. The meeting reviewed examples of permanent housing that had been designed for women and invited a cross-section of national and Tasmanian partners in government, philanthropy and business to consider how best to contribute toward the construction of more permanent homes for women and children facing homelessness in Tasmania. The Hobart Women's Shelter sets a target of an additional 25 permanent homes by 2024 — the year of its 50th anniversary of service to women and children in Tasmania.

The Hobart Women's Shelter launches a Buy a Brick campaign based on the data of 8 out of 10 women turned away from the Shelter and with the donations received purchases a block



Design: Core Collective Architects with Christopher Clinton Architect. Visualisation: Kathrine Vand.

of land on the foreshore of Herdsman Cove in Hobart. The Brighton Council waives the planning and development fees for the construction of two two-bedroom homes on the block.

Local and national businesses begin to support the project by offering their professional services and products to the Hobart Women's Shelter for the prototype with either no fee or a heavily discounted fee. These include Brickworks, Clennetts Hardware, Corian, Enviro-dynamics, Exsto Management, Gandy and Roberts Consulting Engineers, Gray Planning, Howarth Fisher and Associates, Laura McCusker Furniture Designer and Maker, Lee Tyers Building Surveyors, Lymesmith, Red Sustainability, SBLA, Tierney Law, Don Thomson and Veris.

### 2023...

Construction on the prototype housing units for the Hobart Women's Shelter will commence in the first quarter of 2023. Conversations with councils, developers, businesses, and local Tasmanians are underway to find land that can be gifted or provided to the Hobart Women's Shelter under long lease arrangements. With Federal and State Governments engaging with new funding sources to make the construction of tens of thousands of new social housing units a priority, the Hobart Women's Shelter data on housing needs for women leaving violence in Tasmania will be particularly valuable as budget planning unfolds.

The Just Healthy Families Health Justice Partnership will continue to provide specialist family violence legal services across the State during 2023, including at the Hobart Women's Shelter, and will seek to secure a longer-term funding stream for 2024 and beyond.

These collaborations between health, justice and housing partners is demonstrating how the safety and wellbeing of women and their children can be addressed in a more sustained and holistic way when quality housing is combined with early intervention services from women's legal and health services.

If you would like to contribute to the Hobart Women's Shelter project to build permanent housing for women in Tasmania please contact [ceo@hobartws.org.au](mailto:ceo@hobartws.org.au) or contribute at <https://www.hobartws.org.au/buy-a-brick-campaign/>

Author notes: Cate Sumner is an international human rights lawyer who was awarded a Churchill Fellowship for Tasmania in 2019 to explore collaborative finance models from government, business and philanthropy to support Tasmania's first Health Justice Partnership.

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Kristen Wylie, is the Acting Director of Tasmania Legal Aid