

20 September 2021

Attention: Social Housing Review Panel

Social Housing Regulation Review

The Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association (VAADA) recognises the importance of this work and commends the government on providing an opportunity to review the relevant housing regulations. These regulations can be a vehicle to provide enhanced support and protections to tenants, provide greater input from tenants into the residential circumstances and can assist in allowing for manageable growth of the sector to address the burden of demand.

We note this in particular with a number of alcohol and other drug (AOD) treatment agencies reporting that the current system is inaccessible, with a number relying on the tenuous circumstances and arrangements with agents regarding private rentals. This remains an ongoing challenge, with the burden of stigma all but preventing access to sustainable long term housing for people in recovery.

Suitable housing is vital in achieving recovery and a breakdown in, or access to unsuitable housing, can undo positive gains made through AOD treatment in addressing substance dependence.

While it varies from region to region, there appear to be significant limitations for people in recovery or experiencing AOD dependency in finding suitable community and private housing. Aside from affordability, which is an ubiquitous issue which limits access to a huge portion of the population, stigma relating to substance dependence is also an overbearing limitation.

We will provide the Review Panel with a number of observations and recommendations in relation to the experiences of AOD treatment agencies and those who we support in accessing suitable housing.

1. There is inadequate suitable and affordable housing stock to support people experiencing or recovering from AOD dependence

Stable housing remains a key factor in recovery but remains difficult to get and easy to lose, for many of the people who engage our treatment services. The loss of housing creates a high risk of relapse and the associated harms. People in these circumstances can shift away from support networks and experience significant harm.

There is a need to ensure that people experiencing AOD dependence have ready access to suitable housing. Considerations beyond the availability of property include whether it is a 'dry' house or otherwise drug free style of accommodation and the location of the property (is it located in a neighbourhood containing adverse influences or otherwise located in regions where the service user had associates who regularly used drugs).

Consideration on increasing the availability of long term housing options and intensive support when needed for people experiencing significant adversity related to AOD should be considered.

2. People experiencing AOD dependence or in recovery feel they have little recourse in cases where there is a dispute

Greater access to easily comprehensible support systems should be encouraged, which may include a housing ombudsman. Furthermore, earlier intervention through the provision of ongoing support may prevent the escalation of issues which may result in eviction.

Funded peer in-reach models with a step up / step down capacity could play a vital role in reducing evictions and preventing conflict.

There should also be access to a mediation service which would seek to respond and ameliorate disputes between two or more residents. Such a service should be free of charge, non-confrontational with minimal wait times. The service should have capability to mediate between residents who may present with various issues, such as AOD dependence or mental health issues.

3. There is limited scope for supporting people to find suitable housing while engaging in AOD treatment

There is limited in-reach support into AOD treatment agencies to assist people to find suitable housing. A number of agencies have noted issues in engaging broader community service providers, including housing, noting that the availability of suitable housing varied depending on the region. Planning for suitable housing should commence when the person first accesses AOD treatment with the assessment process at that time being adaptable to assist in determining suitable housing following discharge from treatment services. Repeat assessments may re-traumatise some people.

We note that there are some cases where a service user may be unexpectedly discharged from an AOD residential service due to, for instance, violence or the threat of violence; in these circumstances, there appears to be little contingency built into the system regarding suitable housing. These individuals may be at greater risk of harm than most and their housing needs should be supported more assertively.

4. Coordination of service support

Agencies have indicated varied pathways for housing support, in part dependent on relationships and capacity. A mapping exercise of any systemic links between AOD and housing would clearly articulate where gaps are, and assist in providing the ingredients for enhanced service coordination. A small body of workers, attached to an organisation, could undertake this work then seek to assist in developing cross sector capability between both sectors.

5. The impact of stigma

Stigma remains a major deterrent to help seeking behaviour and impacts upon access to a broad range of community and health related services. We are aware of an increasing incidence of 'denial of service' across a number of service types, where, due to individual or systemic discrimination due to AOD use or dependence, people are denied service. This could be characterised as certain people being seen as too difficult or complex, or seen as high risk with regard to damaging the property or using substances. The human and financial cost of denial of housing services to these people is significant with denial amounting to an increased likelihood of engagement with acute health or justice services.

It is largely evident from the majority of AOD treatment agencies that people experiencing substance dependence or who are in recovery are under serviced with regard to housing support. Regulation reform could provide for a number of safeguards to support people to access more suitable housing and associated support services.

Please contact me if you have any queries.

Sincerely,

Sam Biondo

Executive Officer

Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association