

# The Homelessness to a Home Program — Outcomes in Rural Victoria

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*'There's light at the end of the tunnel — knowing there is a bright future there. Without housing I wouldn't be able to achieve anything.'*

This article discusses research undertaken by The Centre for Social Impact (CSI), Swinburne University of Technology, in partnership with staff from the Uniting Vic Tas and CatholicCare Ballarat services, to identify outcomes for people using the Homelessness to a Home (H2H) program.

## Covid-19 and the Response to Homelessness

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Victorian Government implemented the H2H program, allocating \$150 million. This aimed to provide access to medium and long-term housing and support packages for 1,845 households in regional and metropolitan areas of Victoria.<sup>1</sup>

Three types of properties were provided to clients who had been housed in temporary accommodation: public housing properties, general lease properties or head-leased properties, with the majority of clients placed into general lease or head-leased properties for a period of 18 months.<sup>2</sup>

Uniting Vic Tas secured funding through a consortium with CatholicCare to administer the H2H program in the Central Highlands, Wimmera and South West regions of Victoria. In total, the H2H program in these regions involves 74 H2H packages. Both Uniting Vic Tas and CatholicCare (and the Salvation Army in Horsham) provide ongoing support which includes supporting people with identified goals, along with a range of personal ongoing needs such as physical and mental health.

## Positive Outcomes for Adults

The H2H program is based on the principles of Housing First programs. Previous research has shown that Housing First is:

- highly effective in providing housing stability for people with a history of chronic homelessness and complex needs, and is
- successful in enabling access to services and improving some non-housing outcomes including access to health, mental health and other support services.

Yet the evidence also shows that tenants often face significant challenges in realising non-housing outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, an evaluation of the NSW STEP to Home, which utilises the Housing First approach, identified positive outcomes across the measures associated with successful Housing First approaches. In this study, clients demonstrated a considerable increase in their:

- housing stability, retention, security, safety and satisfaction
- mental health, and quality of life
- employment participation
- connection with family, friends, and community, as well as heightened community participation.<sup>4</sup>

## The H2H Consumer Outcomes Survey

A Consumer Outcomes Survey with 12 questions, based on a selection of outcomes from the Community Services Outcomes Tree, was developed. Over a four-week period, service staff visited

or phoned 21 H2H recipients to collect the views of people about the program. The survey asked about: outcomes (changes in life areas); the contribution of the H2H service to outcomes; barriers to outcomes; and service improvements.

Outcomes were divided into outcomes for adults (the respondent) and outcomes specific to children (if any were part of the household). People were asked to rate how had these areas of life (outcomes) changed for them (or for their child) since receiving housing and support from the H2H program.

The outcomes with the most positive results for most respondents (adults) were:

- having stable housing (90 per cent said this had 'got a lot better' and 10 per cent 'a bit better')
- having safe housing and neighbourhood (86 per cent reported this had 'got a lot better' and 14 per cent 'got a bit better')
- having suitable housing (86 per cent 'got a lot better' and 10 per cent 'a bit better')
- Hope for the future (84 per cent 'got a lot better' and 16 per cent 'a bit better')
- having choice and empowerment (81 per cent 'got a lot better', 14 per cent 'a bit better').

Additionally, two other areas of life had improved for 90 per cent of the cohort:

- mental health
- having meaning and purpose.

Notable improvement was indicated for Managing Health (86 per cent 'a lot/bit better') and Employment (81 per cent 'a lot/bit better').

Negative outcomes were rarely indicated across the 16 outcome areas. Only five individuals felt that some life areas had gotten worse for them. Areas where there were higher levels of no change and negative outcomes, were:

- financial management skills (10 per cent got 'a lot/bit worse' with 20 per cent 'no change')
- meeting basic expenses (10 per cent got 'a lot/bit worse' with 19 per cent 'no change')
- social connections and relationships (10 per cent got 'a lot/bit worse' with 20 per cent 'no change')
- access to and use of services (5 per cent got 'a bit worse' with 24 per cent 'no change'),

- participation in community and social activities (6 per cent got 'a lot worse' with 31 per cent 'no change'),
- relationship with family members (five per cent got 'a lot worse' with 19 per cent 'no change').

In relation to outcomes for children, the most positive outcome reported by adult respondents was their child's participation in community and social activities, with 100 per cent of those with children in the home noting this had improved (75 per cent 'a lot better' and 25 per cent 'a bit better'). Results also highlighted the ability of the program to keep families together when families are housed in a safe and supportive way. As one parent noted:

*'When homeless, my young son couldn't stay with me, but now he can.'*

Respondents were also asked to explain the 'biggest change' resulting

from the H2H program. Eleven people highlighted that the program had given them stability in many areas of their life including education and work. For all, the change in life had been transformative:

*'Since I moved into this unit, that gave me the stable housing I was looking for. Everything else is much easier now I have stable housing.'*

*'Having a roof over my head. Having a stable place to live, having my things in place especially my medication and reassurance people will help me.'*

*'Gone back to school and have a job that I love.'*

*'Feeling I have a support network is monumental for someone use to living in limbo. Having the security of knowing where you're going to be next week, next month, etc. Home security is everything.'*



For some, housing stability has provided the opportunity to attend to self-care and mental health as areas of significant change:

*'Staying Clean — not using or dealing or using illegal substances.'*

*'Having a stable home — now I can address other issues. My mental health has improved.'*

Ninety-five percent (95 per cent) of respondents felt that the H2H program had made a large positive contribution to the outcomes they reported.

*'I just want to say thanks so much for everything you've done for me and my son. As soon as you guys accepted me into the program, it changed everything.'*

In their explanation of the contribution the service had made, most respondents referenced the important role of their support worker.

*'My support worker has been gold. Has gone above and beyond. Has helped a lot.'*

*'My worker stayed with me when I was taking out an IVO. They do help without asking. They're a safety net.'*

*'Someone I can talk to. Not being alone all the time.'*

*'They encouraged me to complete Cert IV in Employment Services and this has led to me working at [a community service].'*

### The Barriers to Positive Outcomes

Not all potential outcomes are achievable solely with the support of services. Outcomes attainment can be thwarted when ongoing personal, service or system barriers prevail.

The issues of housing (for example not affordable, not available or not suitable) and money (for example, low income, debts, lack of financial management skills) remain the biggest structural barriers to outcomes identified by respondents (housing is a barrier for 90 per cent, and money issues for 67 per cent). Personal issues operate as a barrier to outcomes for 76 per cent of respondents

(including mental health, drug and alcohol, personal trauma/crisis, and difficulty in supporting children).

Asked to explain the biggest barrier to achieving positive change, overwhelmingly respondents identified the experience of homelessness.

### H2H: The Ongoing Support

Respondents discussed the impact of having the H2H service re-funded, following a decision of the Victorian government in mid-2022 to offer a further two years of funding. Twelve respondents emphasised the value they place on the ongoing

support provided by the service, and importance of the continuity of that support through ongoing personnel.

*'My support worker and I regularly touch base. I trust in my worker, I don't want a new worker as we have trust.'*

When considering the prospect of losing the H2H service, if funding had not been secured, most people felt it would be a loss of a 'safety net', and of housing that suited their needs. Others could foresee a return to homelessness due to an inability to afford rent. Some people made the strong



point that discontinuing the program and support could have extremely severe consequences.

*'I would likely end up in a mental health facility'.*

*'I would possibly become suicidal again'.*

Without H2H, it is possible that the positive life changes noted by respondents, including the stabilisation of family, improvement in health, improved meaning and purpose in life, and the security of a safe and stable home, would be compromised.

### How Valuable is H2H?

The outcomes of H2H align with other research into the effectiveness of Housing First programs. This current study highlights that the provision of both housing and support enables a wide range of life outcomes.

However, the support packages under H2H are also time-limited, which directly contradicts the principle of Housing First that support should be made available with no fixed end date. Given the repeated, and now recent Victorian, evidence of the outcomes of Housing First

programs like H2H, withdrawal of investment in such programs can only be understood as running counter to the evidence.

#### Endnotes

1. Nous Group 2022, *From Homelessness to a Home: Early Implementation Assurance Review*, Nous Group, Australia
2. Ibid
3. Roggenbuck C 2022, *Housing First: An evidence review of implementation, effectiveness and outcomes*, report prepared by AHURI, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne
4. Barnes E and Hartley C 2022, *STEP to Home Program Evaluation*, Centre for Social Impact, UNSW, Sydney

