

To the Members of the Inquiry,

Drummond Street Services, a leading provider of support services for vulnerable families and individuals in Victoria, welcomes the opportunity to submit this response to the Inquiry into the Commonwealth Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our organisation has witnessed firsthand the vast and multifaceted impact of the pandemic on our communities, particularly those experiencing marginalisation and social exclusion.

We strongly support the [Build Back Fairer: The COVID-19 Marmot Review](#)<sup>i</sup>, which aligns with our findings around the impacts of COVID-19 and how it impacted many unequally. We strongly encourage the government to take on all relevant recommendations in this review.

In addition, we believe the Inquiry's focus should consider the specific key areas below:

- **Mental health and suicide prevention:** The pandemic has exacerbated existing mental health challenges and triggered new ones. As highlighted by Drummond Street's [COVID-19 Impact Report series](#)<sup>ii</sup>, suicide risk doubled during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mental illness risk alerts were 1.4 times higher during the pandemic with a large increase in complex risk issues such as eating disorders, self-harm and suicide ideation and poor mental health amongst children and young people.

As highlighted in the [Future-proofing Safety report](#),<sup>iii</sup> the increased complexity of client presentations in terms of both risk and needs was one of the strongest themes to emerge from all data sources. Practitioners across reported that the primary cause for increased complexity was the compounding impacts of COVID-19 and its associated restrictions on people's pre-existing needs around mental health, financial stress, housing instability and AOD misuse experienced an exacerbation and escalation of these needs with heightened anxiety, isolation, and loss of employment. Just as importantly, practitioners emphasised that a lack of access to service supports over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in these needs becoming more acute and severe. The research team heard that, by the time an individual or family reached services for support, their needs were more varied and entrenched.

We urge the Inquiry to examine the effectiveness of Commonwealth-funded mental health programs and identify gaps in service provision for at-risk populations.

- **Family and Interpersonal violence:** Lockdowns and social isolation experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic across all states and territories increased the risk of domestic violence. The Inquiry should examine the effectiveness of Commonwealth-funded family violence prevention and support programs and identify areas for improvement in responsiveness and accessibility. Government



should also consider the long-term implications of the heightened experiences of family violence during the pandemic and consider the need for increased recovery support, aligning with the 4th domain of The National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032.

The [Future-proofing Safety Final Report](#), led by the Centre for Family Research and Evaluation (CFRE) at Drummond Street Services, in partnership with research partners the Centre for Innovative Justice (CIJ) at RMIT University and the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), highlights the significant challenges and specific opportunities for services and clients that emerged during COVID-19. These include elevated client risk and need, changed service responses, gaps and weaknesses within the family violence and sexual assault service system, and the impacts of COVID-19 on the workforce. The report finishes with a future focus by offering a framework for crisis readiness responses that aims to future-proof how we can do better to respond to family violence during future crises.

While the report focuses on the experiences of family violence and sexual assault within Victoria, there are many findings that are highly relevant to this national enquiry, including the impact of Federal income support decisions. The early access to superannuation for example had extremely damaging consequences for many people experiencing family violence, who were forced to withdraw their superannuation. These measures will have long lasting implications for victims and survivors, including long term, entrenched poverty.

- **Housing and homelessness:** The pandemic exacerbated housing insecurity and homelessness. As highlighted in the [Future-proofing Safety](#) project, housing distress and homelessness were key issues highlighted by practitioners working across a range of sectors across Victoria. For families fleeing violence, the lack of access to secure and long-term housing put many women and children at risk. We recommend the Inquiry assess the effectiveness of Commonwealth homelessness initiatives and consider additional measures to prevent evictions and promote long term secure housing solutions, particularly for people fleeing family and domestic violence situations.
- **Priority populations:** The pandemic disproportionately impacted vulnerable groups, including Indigenous Australians, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and people with disabilities, trans/refugee sex workers, people with disabilities and those in temporary and government high rise accommodation. The Inquiry should assess the effectiveness of existing mechanisms for addressing the specific needs of these groups during future pandemics and recommend strategies for more equitable and inclusive responses.

There is also a need to consider the intersectional needs of people from priority populations and acknowledge and respond to the elevated risk and needs of many within the community. Research conducted with Drummond Street's Centre for Family Research and Evaluation and Equality Australia during COVID, [There is No Safe Place at Home](#)<sup>iv</sup>, highlighted the distinct risk that some groups faced, with a number of LGBTIQ+ people more likely to experience violence than other LGBTIQ+ people. For example, young LGBTIQ+ people who were under 25 were



4.5x more likely to experience violence and those living with a disability were 1.9x more likely to experience violence.

As highlighted in the [Future-proofing Safety](#)<sup>v</sup> report, marginalised groups should not be an afterthought in disaster response. Government and services should be better prepared for future crises by developing up crisis readiness policies which consider diverse and marginalised communities and how they will be engaged and responded to during future crises.

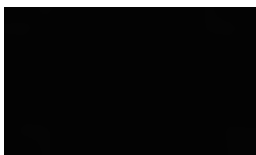
- **Long COVID:** At Drummond Street Services, we have many staff struggling with long covid, which impacts service delivery. For many workers across other service and sectors, where flexible work arrangement and access to sick leave are not possible, long-COVID has brought with it debilitating health impacts in addition to financial insecurity.

As this vulnerability exposes broader workforce risks and risks in relation to service provision for the most vulnerable within society, we urge the government prioritises research into long COVID's debilitating effects on individuals and its impact on workforce resilience. In addition, better financial safety nets should be put in place for individuals experiencing long COVID, and services and businesses who are also grappling with its impacts.

Drawing on our extensive experience supporting vulnerable communities, Drummond Street Services hope that the Inquiry's findings and recommendations will be instrumental in shaping a more effective and equitable response to future pandemics. We are committed to collaborating with the Inquiry and sharing our insights to ensure that no one is left behind in the face of future crises.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,



Karen Field,  
CEO Drummond Street Services

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i [Build Back Fairer: The COVID-19 Marmot Review](#)

ii [COVID-19 Impact Report series](#)

iii [Future-proofing Safety report.](#)

iv [There is No Safe Place at Home](#)

v [Future-proofing Safety](#)