THINGS TO CONSIDER
WHEN WORKING WITH OLDER WOMEN WHO ARE EXPERIENCING, OR AT RISK OF, HOMELESSNESS

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ABOUT THIS PAPER

This document outlines issues for practitioners and service providers to consider when working with older women who are experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness. It is targeted primarily at practitioners and service providers who are not experienced with, or specialists, in providing services to older women experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness. Therefore, it should be used as a primer and further information should be sought before providing advice to clients.

This document is based on the evidence summarised in the companion Background Paper—Older women who are experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness. The Background Paper should be read when more information and detail is required. The accompanying Position Paper of the same name, with key recommendations to Australian governments, may also be relevant.

In all its work including this paper, AAG adopts an inclusive definition of womanhood which includes self-perception and/or perception by others as a woman, including a person’s appearance, expression, identity or physical characteristics, that may be in accord with or opposed to, their physical anatomy, chromosomal sex or sex assigned at birth.

For the purposes of this paper, AAG defines “older women” as women aged 50 years or older, or from 45 years or older for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in line with international research evidence and Australian aged care service legislation for people who have experienced homelessness (1).
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Stop and reflect on your own potential prejudices and biases

Be aware of your own potential prejudices and biases, as this will likely affect the quality of the services you provide. You can challenge yourself by keeping up to date on research exploring the issues faced by, and needs of, older women at risk of homelessness. The following points challenge prejudices and biases that research has shown people commonly have (2–4):

► All older women do not have the same pathway to homelessness (5,6), and therefore do not have the same needs.

► Many older women are experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness due to a single event such as an increase in rent, eviction notice or reduction in income (7). Research shows that affordable housing is one of the key drivers of homelessness in Australia.

► Older women experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness may not have complex needs; the only service they need may be access to affordable, appropriate and secure housing (8,9).

► Older women experiencing homelessness do not necessarily have a history of repeated or extended homelessness, women are more likely than men to experience homelessness for the first time later in life (5,10,11).

► International human rights law recognises everyone’s right to adequate housing, interpreted broadly as the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity (12,13).

► A person’s pathway into being at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness does not affect their right to adequate housing.

► Do not assume family and friends will provide housing or expect them to do so:

► Women should not be forced to exhaust their social networks before receiving services, even if their social networks are happy to offer this support.

► Accessing social networks may also be a source of stress and vulnerability, putting older women at risk of abuse.

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i. You could start by looking at Figure 1 and reading the AAG Background Paper on older women experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness, which includes references to research evidence.

ii. More information on the risk factors for homelessness experienced more often by older women than older men can be found in Figure 1 and the AAG Background Paper on older women experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness.
Homelessness is a gendered issue—be sensitive to this

The gendered nature of homelessness, including older people’s homelessness, is widely acknowledged in the research literature (2,14,15).

➤ Older women in Australia are particularly at risk of experiencing homelessness for the first time in later life due to the socioeconomic landscape they inhabit, including gendered caregiving expectations and the fact that women live longer than men, on average (16–18).

➤ This gendered socioeconomic risk is multiplied by the lack of affordable housing suitable for older Australians.ii

Older women at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness often face compounded stigma due to their age, gender and homelessness, as well as the expectations by society that women should play a caregiving role and represent ‘home’ (3,6,14,19,20).

➤ While acknowledging that there is a need for services and support specific to older women, there must also be an acknowledgement that older women have diverse life experiences and needs (5,15,21), including their:
  ➤ cultural backgrounds,
  ➤ sexual identities,
  ➤ disabilities,
  ➤ health care needs,
  ➤ housing needs,
  ➤ support needs and desired level of independence, including the need for supports to ensure social connectedness.
Think about the language you are using

- Begin by building trust and rapport before tackling issues related to homelessness, e.g. through chatting about a shared interest in a casual setting (22).

- Avoid using the term “homeless” as many older women may not relate to this word, especially if they are living with family and friends, in unfit housing, or in their car or caravan. Discussions framed around “housing needs” (15), or a casual discussion of their current housing may be more appropriate.

Ask the right questions

- A person-centred and relational approach that aims to identify and meet an older woman’s unique and personal needs and wishes is essential (23–26).

- Never assume that an older woman will raise concerns about her housing needs with you. They might not feel comfortable asking for help, might not realise they need help, or might not realise you may be able to help them or point them to other services that can help them.

- An assessment of older women’s housing situations should be incorporated in an appropriate manner into all contacts with older women seeking services and support, as many of the issues that lead people to seek help (e.g. loss of function, poor health, bereavement, abuse) are risk factors for homelessness and may also negatively affect their health and wellbeing.

Familiarise yourself with the services available to support older women experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness

Recognise that generalist homelessness or specialist services for other cohorts such as younger people may not to be appropriate for older people at risk of homelessness (22,27). Conversely, many aged care services may not be able to provide appropriate services for older people facing homelessness (28).

- Older women at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness (50 years or older or 45 years for older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women) should be referred to aged care services specialising in working with older people facing homelessness. However, it must be acknowledged that there is a lack of such services.

iii. More information on the risk factors for homelessness for older women and current services in Australia can be found in Figure 1 and the AAG Background Paper on older women experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness.
Figure 1. Summary of the risk factors contributing to homelessness in older women in Australia. The overarching and multiplying risk factors that affect all older women are the lack of information and access to affordable, appropriate and secure housing and the lower socioeconomic status of women when compared to men.

Green circles represent the individual risk factors that contribute to homelessness in some older people, regardless of their gender.

Orange circles represent the individual risk factors that are more likely to contribute to homelessness in some older women when compared to older men.

Reproduced from AAG Background Paper (2018) Older women who are experiencing, or at risk of homelessness.
Older women experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness

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