



DIAMOND VALLEY
community support

OCTOBER 2021

COVID-19 PANDEMIC HARDSHIP AND CRISIS IMPACT STUDY

A DVCS review of N.E. Banyule and
Nillumbik Communities

PRESENTED BY

Diamond Valley Community Support, Inc.

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DVCS sincerely thanks all those agencies and community members who contributed to this report.

INTRODUCTION

Diamond Valley Community Support (DVCS) is an independent, not-for-profit community organisation providing emergency relief, material aid, information and referral supports to people in hardship, financial and/or personal crisis in the north-east Banyule and Nillumbik regions and surrounds. Each year we assist more than 5000 local residents. We are funded through various sources, the largest of those being our social enterprises, grants and fundraising. We rely heavily on a volunteer workforce to undertake the support services we provide.

DVCS embarked on this study because we wanted to capture the full impact of covid lockdowns on our local community and to advocate on behalf of our communities for more support through grounding community needs in empirical evidence. From anecdotal evidence, through our client base and statistical data, and through our networks with other agencies we work with, we felt strongly that the impacts of COVID lockdowns were far greater than what we were seeing in presentations through our office, which is one of the few services that are (*under*) funded to provide emergency relief and report back to government on the numbers of people reaching out for help. Based on this evidence we suggest that many people were not reaching out for help, had been reaching out for help in diverse ways that often went unreported or underreported, and therefore the “known” impact of the crisis was largely underestimated.

Secondly, we felt it was crucial to raise awareness of the fragility of the sector - what might happen if agencies like ours and most others in the Emergency and Food Relief sector, who rely largely on the good will of volunteers and independent fundraising, were unable to service the level of need in the community.

The Methodology

The methodology of this Impact Study aimed to ground assumptions in well-rounded multi-level and multi-agency data collection. We did this using our own intake data, obtaining data, information and stories from other local support agencies at various levels (funded/unfunded/ community based etc) and through an online survey of the public. We hoped that this would provide both confirmation of trends that DVCS data and other industry data showed, and also tells us the ‘unknown’ impact that is hidden within the community, to enable us to prepare more effectively to meet potential future needs.

Introduction - Continued



"I have walked past your office 15 times before I got the courage to ask for help"

"I did not want my friends to know I am struggling"

Melbourne has seen a "cascading effect of disadvantage increasing through each lockdown" (SBS News 2021), with many seeking emergency relief and food relief services for the first time, leaving many under-funded and under-resourced groups and agencies facing overwhelming demand (VCOSS 2021). Relief agencies and the community are worried about what comes next, especially with the federal government set to reduce disaster payments once Australia hits its vaccination targets.

Our counselling and advice services, our community development services such as the Volunteers hub, and our referral services extend across all of Banyule and Nillumbik, however our Emergency Relief is only for the Northeast Banyule and Nillumbik, this is the area the report is based on. Those postcodes are all of Nillumbik and within Banyule, 3083 (part of), 3087, 3088 (part of), 3093, 3094, 3095 (part of).

BACKGROUND

Among those agencies that we work with as part of the Banyule and Nillumbik Emergency Relief Network, and those in The Food Collective Project, and as part of our well-established relationships in the community and in diverse referral organisations the messaging is loud, clear and consistent.

There is a crisis occurring in 4 main domains, that sit outside a virus-related public health crisis:



HOUSING



FAMILY VIOLENCE



FINANCIAL CRISIS
(INCLUDING FOOD RELIEF)



MENTAL HEALTH

This report will focus on those areas:

Significantly, presenting to an organisation like DVCS for assistance takes a huge amount of courage. Not only do you need to know where to go, but you need to be in a position where you are comfortable asking for help. For most of us, we must admit to ourselves that we have basically reached the rock bottom, where “doing it on your own” is not sustainable anymore.

We have had numerous conversations with clients that come through our doors that have said and I quote:

“ I did not want to admit that I could not put food on my table ”

“ I didn't want Centrelink to know I couldn't look after my kids. I don't want them to take away my kids ”

“ It's something you can't talk about in some places, because you get judged if you reach out for help ”

“ I have never told anyone about this before. I can't talk to my family, or my friends about how I am struggling ”

Background - Continued

That our friends and family and community members are feeling like this and that there is still a huge amount of shame in asking for help is why so many people do not reach out for help.

This is not acceptable and needs to be addressed.

Most importantly we need to address this because the impacts of the COVID pandemic have become so widespread in those 4 domains that THIS is the real crisis that we are going through together.

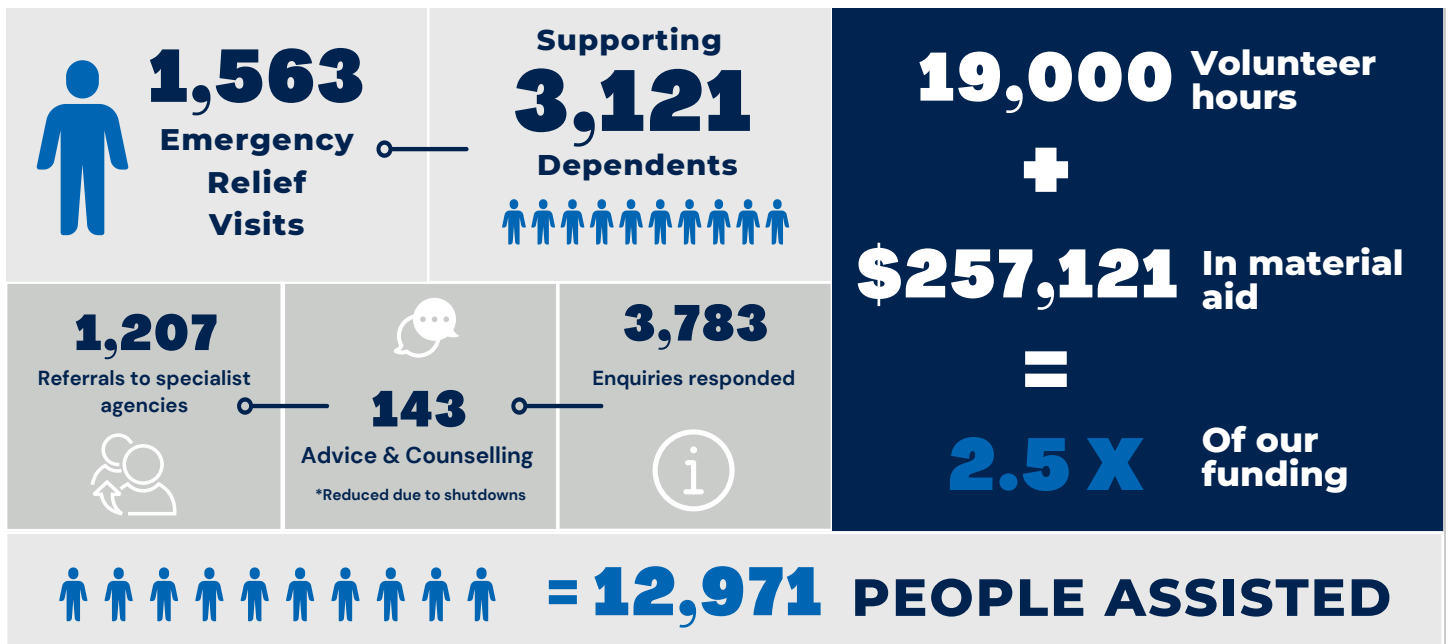
“This is not a crisis at a public health level, but at the level of meeting BASIC day to day necessities, like housing, safety and food”

“It is like any other crisis or emergency, a fire, a flood, a natural disaster, that requires support from ALL levels in our community – government, services, friends, family – everyone.”

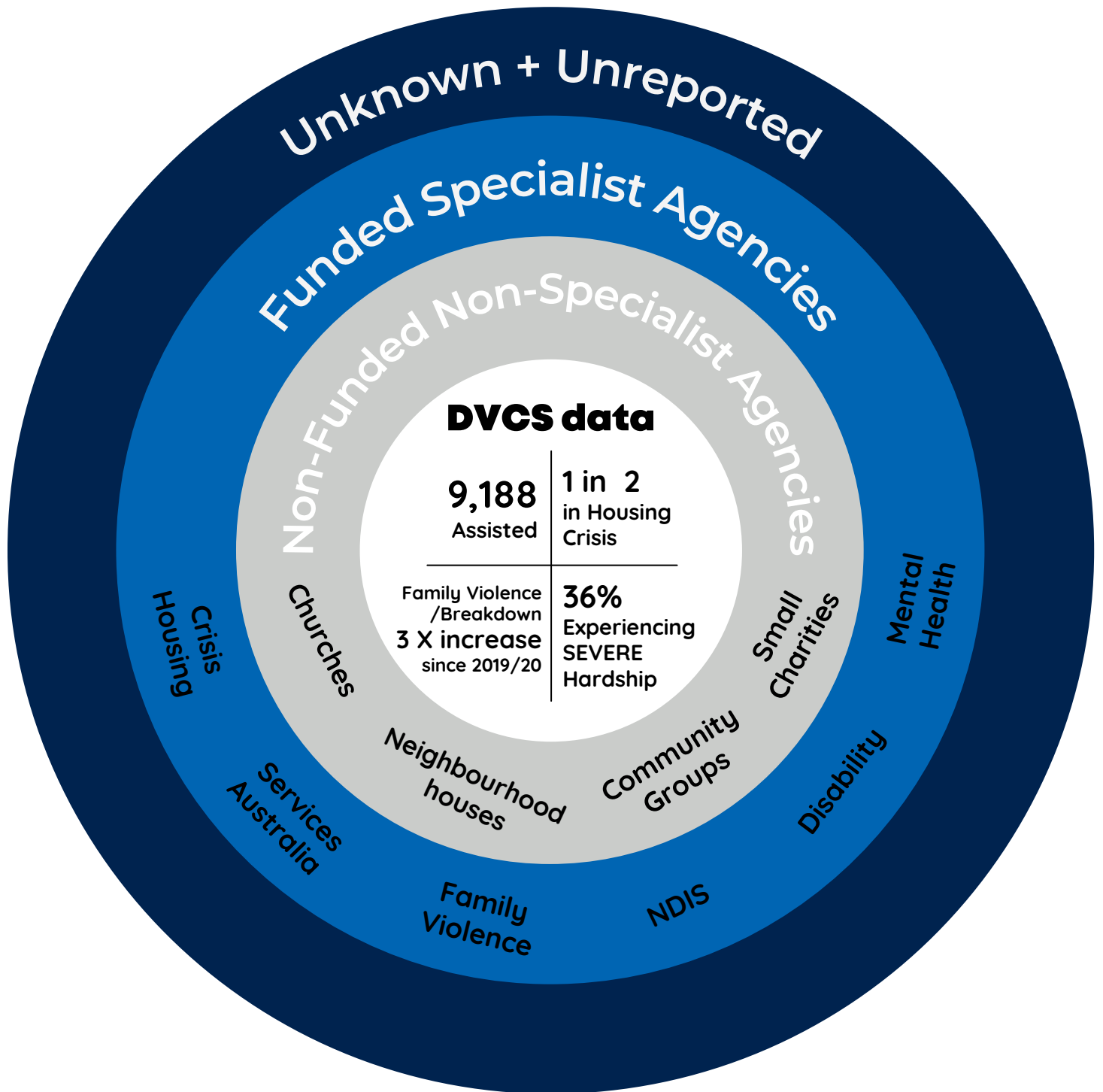
“We need to listen to the community about what the real crisis is and acknowledge it and respond to it accordingly.”

Overview of some key Emergency Relief services offered by DVCS

Over the period of July 2020 - June 2021



SUMMARY - THE KNOWN + THE HIDDEN CRISIS



FOOD SECURITY

“My mental health and wellbeing has decreased dramatically... Costs of utilities go up when we're at home more often, and with being stuck at home and my **mental wellbeing, ... food expenses went up... it all just sucks**”

Local community member

“A lot of people are going without, **struggling at home**, they don't know where they can go for help or don't want to.”

Local community member

“The real need is slipping under the radar. We have had school principals contact us, **knowing families are struggling for food but do not want to reach out**”

Local food relief service”

“We continue to see an increase in clients who wish to access fresh fruit and vegetables, they can access or afford pantry items from other locations”

Local food relief service

“We are seeing an increase in staff from services (disability support, Aboriginal House services, VACCA, enhanced maternal child health) who are quite worried about their clients and are **seeking food assistance and other material aid on their client's behalf**”

Local food relief service

“Services are being used to the point where there is a waiting time for support, **when support is needed urgently** for food to feed the family

Local community member”

“Even though I haven't had financial difficulties I am aware of so many people who have and are **not able to make ends meet.**”

Local community member

“People tell us when they come for food that they have gone early to “Food is Free” in Diamond Creek but they have **not received enough food** to really support them”

Local food relief service

Food Security - Continued

The details in this section will refer to food relief provided by The Food Collective Partners that offer a face-to-face service along with other agencies we know service the same population with food relief. It does not include smaller community organisations and groups that may offer some form of food relief to their cohort. It also does not include some of the larger organisations that are funded to provide services to the region, including the Salvation Army and Uniting (which are also not located in the area), or that of St Vinnies. The Food Collective was established as our response to Covid-19 needs and comprises about 20 food receiving, distributing, donating and fundraising or supporting organisations.

What is Food Security?

Access to food is a fundamental human right. Not having enough to eat has ripple effects on health, the ability to get an education and earn a living. Food security, as defined by the United Nations means that 'all people, at all times, have physical social and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their food preferences and dietary needs for an active and healthy life'.

Food Insecurity Known - 2020-21



Food Security - Continued

The Hidden Crisis

We know people in hardship skip meals, we also know for every person presenting for service approximately 3 do not ask for help.

9 = **200**
Community Pantries = People Assisted
In 2 months 2021



Based on Survey Results
out **3** of **4** people
HAVE NOT REACHED OUT FOR HELP

Trends of Partners

GREENHILLS NEIGHBOURHOOD HOUSE- "a huge increase in the last 2 months"

Last year 2020
25
Families per week



Last month 2021
37
Families per week

Average Household
4
People



Approx.
148
People assisted per week in September 2021

UNI HILL CHURCH

Last year 2020
20 - 25
Families per week



Currently
60
Families per week
*Mostly Whittlesea + Nillumbik

SECOND BITE - ROTARY DIAMOND CREEK - "food relief has doubled in the past 3 months"

Last year 2020
20
Families per week



Last month 2021
30-40
Families per week

Lots of other smaller groups also doing parcels

CARENET

Last year 2020
3-4
Families per month
Banyule + Nillumbik



In August 2021
76
Families per month
Banyule + Nillumbik

HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS CRISIS

“I no longer have job keeper I cannot put my mortgage on hold and job seeker is not enough to support my expenses so I have had to move back in with my parents to be able to provide for my child and still pay my bills
Local community member ”

“ Families are going without food just to pay rent
Local food relief service ”

“This sixth lockdown is proving to be extremely hard. I run my own business. Sole trader. No financial support. During each lockdown I find myself stressing over whether or not I'll have clients to return to. Will I have to rebuild my business. This alone is a heavy burden. Counselling is expensive. We've been lucky our bank let us pause our loan again but it's only for 2 months, then what?
Local community member ”

“ People are moving out of the area because they just cant make ends meet
Local food relief service ”

“I am a single mother who was so proud to purchase my first house by myself after escaping family violence. I have since had to move back into my parents' home after losing my employment as the result of COVID and not being able to pay my mortgage
Local community member ”

“ People are just getting priced out of rentals in Diamond Creek. There are no affordable housing options around anymore. That is the problem
Local food relief service ”

“We see so many clients every week now who are homeless or living on the brink of eviction and they just cant access the right support
Local food relief service ”

“ As a small business with no employees, I was not eligible for the state government grants all of last year. If not for JK, we'd most likely have lost our house. My work was decimated by COVID.
Local community member ”

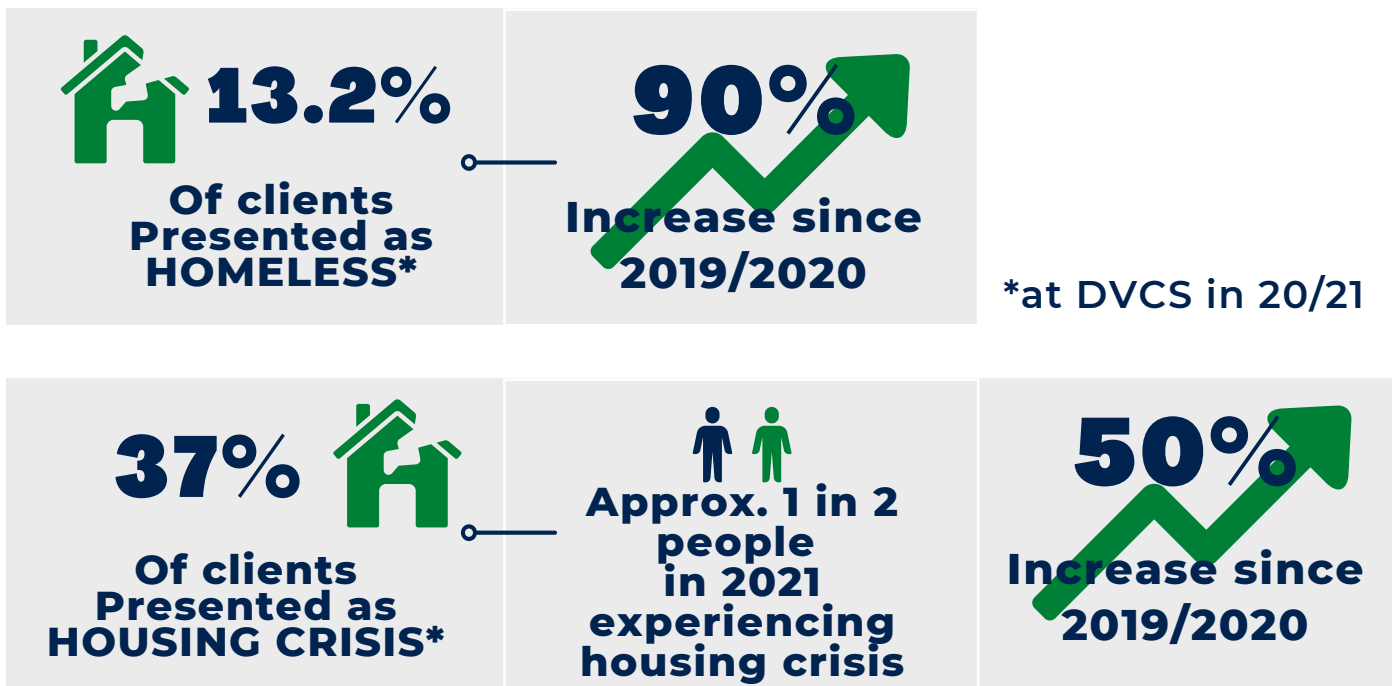
Housing and Homeless Crisis - Continued

This section refers to data from DVCS assessment only and constitutes all forms of homeless and housing crisis. DVCS only provides referrals into agencies to further support those experiencing these issues. We may provide ER to someone at the time of the visit, and for this cohort we have sleeping bags, swags and personal care items along with food specific to someone who is homeless. We are not a trained or funded housing crisis service. This data does not take into account any data from actual funded housing organisations or other small 'unfunded' agencies in the area.

What is Homelessness?

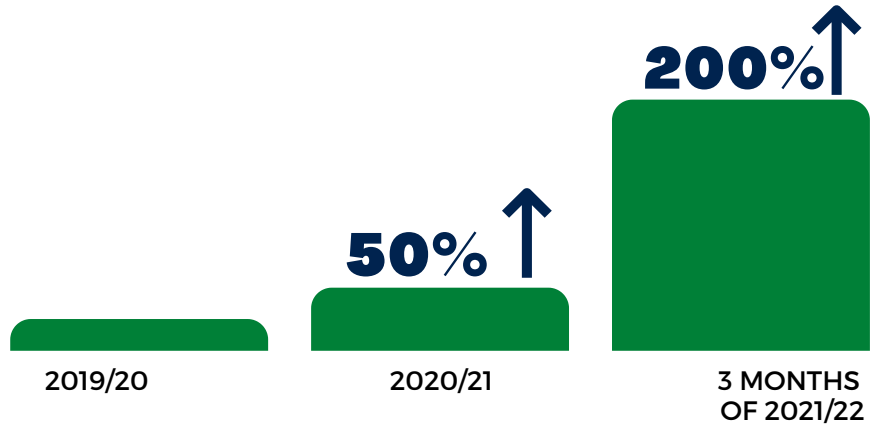
There is no one definition of homelessness. But homelessness is 'home' lessness, not 'roof' lessness. Having a home requires a sense of security, stability, privacy, safety, and the ability to control living space. Homelessness is therefore a lack of one or more of the elements that represent 'home' (ABS 2021). Couch surfing, sleeping in a car, sleeping at friends, sleeping on the streets. These are all types of homelessness. Access to safe and secure housing is one of the most basic human rights (Australian Human Rights Commission 2008). The housing crisis relates to a lack of affordable, safe, secure tenancies - those experiencing a housing crisis may be in rental arrears, on the brink of evictions, going without basic necessities to pay rent or mortgage payments, living in unsafe housing as they have no other option (Vic Health 2011).

The Known Crisis



Housing and Homeless Crisis - Continued

Trends in
homelessness
at DVCS

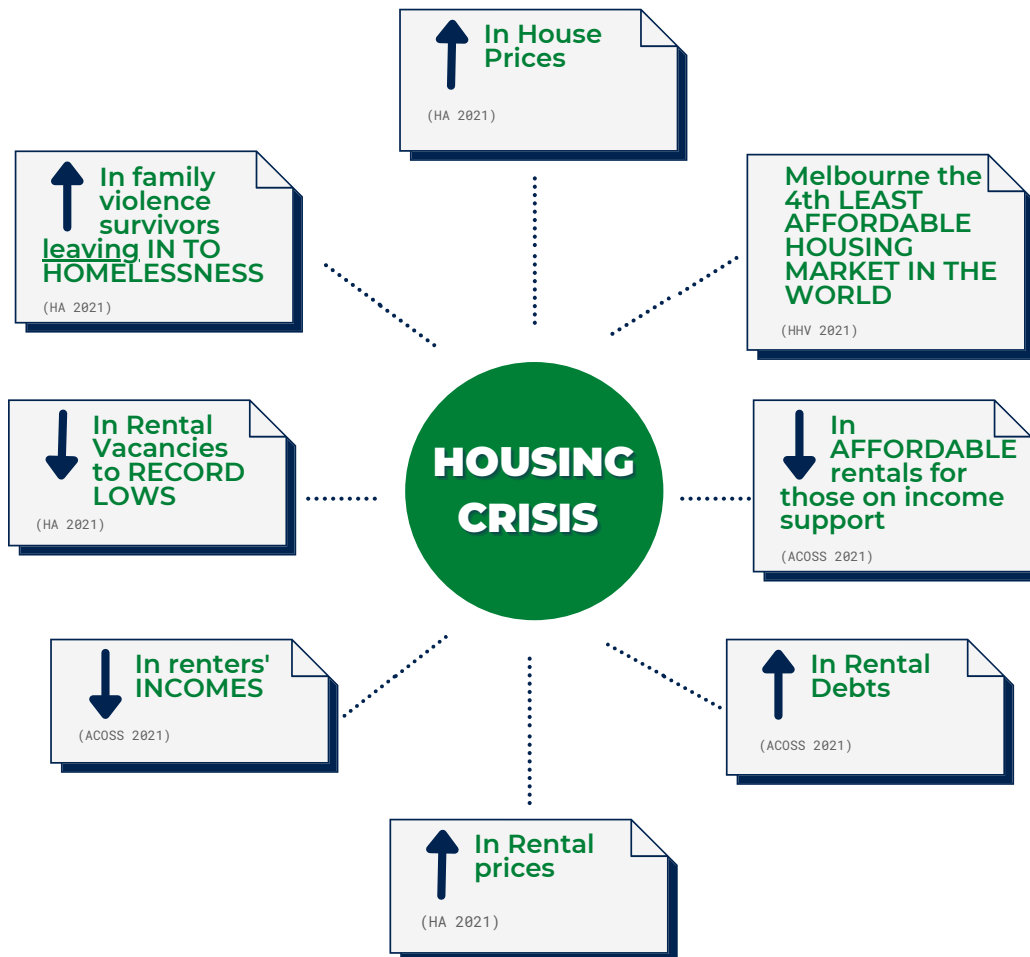


NO POSTCODE

NO LGA

NO HOME

The Hidden Crisis



What Our Partners Say?

All the trends we are seeing locally support the dialogue and trends at the state levels.

Other local agencies say:

“People are being priced out of rentals in the area, they cannot find affordable housing, are going without to pay rent and mortgages, or are moving out of the area” (Local food relief service).

“Lack of affordable, secure, stable housing is a huge factor in why people are coming to us for food. I would say is it the leading factor in hardship at the moment” (Local food relief service).

“People have moved out of the area because they just can’t afford to stay. Others have relocated are struggling to make ends meet” (Local food relief service).

FAMILY BREAKDOWN/VIOLENCE

“My teenager grandson is struggling, running away every chance he can for days. No help as the departments are all too busy. He is one of hundreds of kids suffering. Should be at school.

So the stress & isolation on the family is huge. Can't travel to him, can't help him. Could go on & on”

Local community member

“We know families who are struggling with increased pressures from homeschooling and ongoing lockdowns. **There has been an increase in alcohol in homes to cope.**”

Local food relief service

“**This year we struggled with an abusive housemate, and have been stuck in lockdown with him on multiple occasions.**

My mental health and wellbeing has decreased dramatically. He has moved out so we're okay, but I still constantly feel awful”

Local community member

“**Approximately 10% of our recipients have left FV issues and are either in transition or relocated with children struggling to make ends meet.**”

Local food relief service

“We have seen a rapid decline in mental health of the majority of our recipients. For some this has been due to the increase in level of family violence causing separation of families”

Local food relief service

“**Husband stood down multiple times from his job, children suffering mental health issues due to everything being cancelled and no school**”

Local community member

Family Breakdown/Violence - Continued

This section refers only to data from DVCS assessment. DVCS only provides referrals into agencies to support further people experiencing these issues. We may provide ER to someone at the time of the visit, or further referrals for family violence supports but are not a trained or funded family violence service. The data here does not include data from those agencies.

What is Family Violence?

Family violence is a pattern of abusive behaviour through which a person seeks to control and dominate another person. Family violence does not take the form of a single incident, it is an ongoing behaviour. While physical violence may be the most visible form, others such as sexual, emotional, social, spiritual and economic abuse can be equally harmful (Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria).

The Known Crisis



Plus +



Presenting to DVCS*

Specialist Family Violence service*



The Hidden Crisis



What Our Partners Say?

No people should experience family violence. There is no number that is acceptable.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

“ I work in the pet industry as a small local business. Lost 97% of business every time restrictions were enforced, and are not big enough for any business grants ”

Local community member

“ We are continuing to see an influx of new people (largely hospitality and sole business owners) who need help for a short period of time, and are new to seeking benefits and accessing support ”

Local food relief service

“ My mental health at an all-time low. I work at a Tafe and there are apprentices still doing school on campus and I support the program. I cannot work from home as I don't have internet access all I have is from a mobile hotspot. I can't afford home internet and I am not allowed to go to campus to do my job that I get paid for ”

Local community member

“ I lost my employment last year. I was made redundant. As I had my redundancy payment along with savings, I have not had any financial support from the government.

All my savings are gone. I have nothing left and keep slipping through the cracks of the system even now. I don't see a light at the end... I don't see the end ”

Local community member

“ I'm Locked out of my business, home schooling 3 kids ”

Local community member

“ People continue to experience complex financial situations that further entrench their situation.

Transport continues to be an issue. For example, several clients have taken a loan to buy a car, the car has broken down and they are unable to pay for repairs or replace their car. Public transport is not seen as a viable option as people are scared to travel long distances on it during COVID ”

Local food relief service

Financial Impact - Continued

This section refers to data from DVCS assessment only. Everyone seeking support at DVCS is facing hardship. For the data below, severe hardship comprises of no income or sudden loss of income. Our survey to the public has shown similar results to the assessment data.

During the coronavirus pandemic, DVCS, like many other food relief and emergency relief organisations reported an increase in the number of first-time users, many of whom had no knowledge on how to navigate various processes, information and referrals.

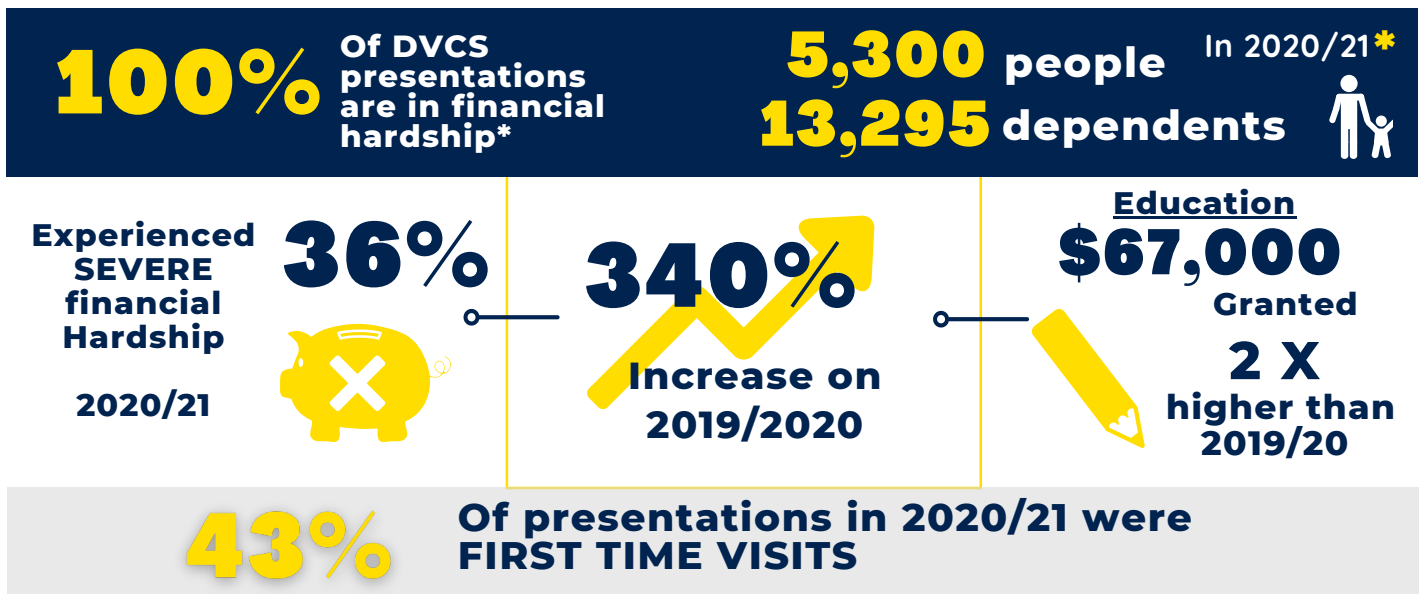
What is Financial Hardship?

Severe financial hardship means an inability to meet basic living expenses for goods and services and cover reasonable costs of living, necessary for survival. Reasonable costs of living include food, rent or mortgage payments, regular medical costs, rates, water and sewage costs, gas, electricity and telephone costs, petrol for your vehicle, public transport costs and education (Services Australia 2021).

Underemployment hit an historic high of 13.8% in April 2020 and unemployment peaked at 7.5% in July 2020 the highest in 20 years (Australia Bureau of Statistics 2021).

Early access to superannuation withdrawals during 2020 lockdowns, 31% were used for mortgage or rental payments, and 29% on household bills (ABS 2020).

Financial Impact known -

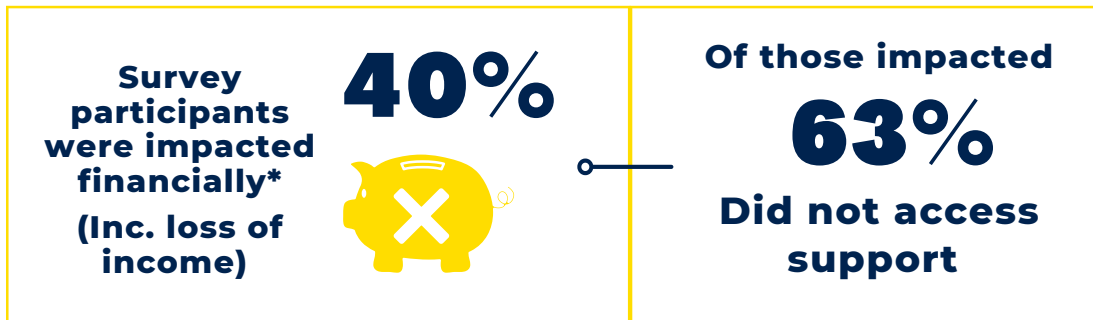


*in Food Collective



Financial Impact - Continued

The Hidden Crisis



*302 people responded to public survey.



IMPACT ON COMMUNITY STRENGTH & RESILIENCE

“ My ability to deal with my worsened mental state has been impacted by being isolated from friends and family, who I would usually rely on for physical assistance with meals and cleaning, and mental/emotional support by being able to be around them when my depression increases my risk of self harm ”

Local community member

“ My partner had issues working from home and being in isolation last year in lockdown, which led to him being made redundant earlier this year. He found it really difficult to get on top of things, and eventually took his life in June ”

Local community member

“ Never a second to myself, always someone home, stress at work as a teacher, constantly having pressure from families, children, workload enormous ”

Local community member

“ I feel grief for the life lost that may not return for a long time, sadness that I'm disconnected from family abroad, stressed with home schooling and my small business, anxiety about living with covid in the community because I have a suppressed immune system ”

Local community member

“ Extreme loneliness & Disconnections ”

Local community member

“ I am really struggling with the fact that I haven't been able to visit my family overseas. It is impacting my mental health and my ability to do my job. I'm on the verge of a burn-out. Not being able to go out and see friends is extremely hard for an extroverted person like me.

I worry about my friend, my family, my colleagues, my neighbours. It has had a huge impact on everyone that I know ”

Local community member

Impact on Community Strength & Resilience - Continued

This section looks largely at the DVCS data around wellbeing and the survey responses and trends from agencies to produce a picture of the level of community strength and resilience.

What is Community Strength & Resilience?

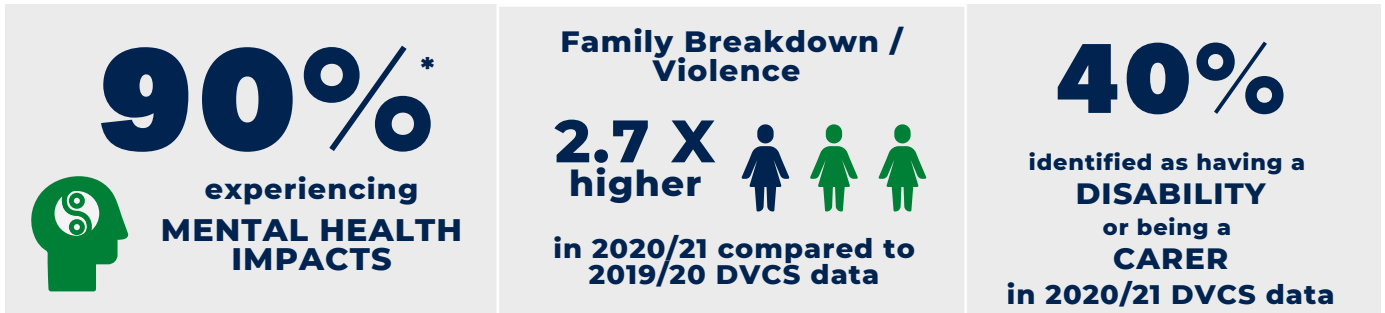
“Resilience is the basis of modern emergency management policy. It is recognised as being a major protective factor, for both individuals and communities. The emergency management sector is increasingly looking to foster community resilience as a way of helping communities prepare for, respond to and recover from natural disasters and emergency events.”

“The term ‘resilience’ was first used in psychology to describe the ability to cope with or ‘bounce back’ from adversity and trauma.”

“Effective partnerships are critical to enhancing disaster resilience. Disaster resilience is the collective responsibility of all sectors of society, including all levels of government, business, the non-government sector and individuals. If all these sectors work together with a united focus and a shared sense of responsibility to improve disaster resilience, they will be far more effective than the individual efforts of any one sector.”

“Recognising the interconnected roles of the for-profit and non-profit sectors, government, faithbased, and community organizations in maintaining community-wide well-being is key to understanding how to protect a community and make it more resilient.” (VCOSS 2017)

The Known Crisis



* from DVCS survey responses

The interconnectedness between emotional wellbeing, financial wellbeing, and mental health is well documented. Moreover, mental health can be caused by and subsequently lead to more financial stress, and even stress of the family, both financially and mentally, significantly impacts a child's wellbeing = significant impact on capacity, strength and ability to 'bounce back' from crisis and adversity (Beyond Blue 2021; Enis & Bunting 2013; Commonwealth of Australia 2011; AIHW 2018).

Lifeline Data



The Lockdown of Services

**LOCKDOWNS
&
SHUTDOWNS**

of support services

- Reduced Options to Access Services
- Loss of Contact with Case Workers & Ongoing Support
- Disengagement with Services
- Increased Wait times for Support & Call Backs

Demand increases on those who are OPEN

The **FRONT LINE** & NOW
THE **LAST LINE OF DEFENCE**

The DVCS Casework program has experienced significant problems in linking into referrals agencies and in receiving submission approvals, for our clients experiencing complex issues. For clients and other community members trying to navigate these barriers to pathways can be overwhelming, frustrating, and at times, defeating.

What the Community Says?

Most increased stressors are in the domains of...

 IMPACTS	HOME SCHOOLING	WORK from 	 lack of connection	LACK of Certainty & HOPE
Ineffective Communication	Family Breakdown 	 IMPACT on CHILDREN	 TRUST & FAITH in Gov't	 Social Support

Impact on Community Strength & Resilience - Continued

50 people shared stories related to how they have been impacted by COVID. Many of these stories crossed over domains, which would be expected – for example, those who had experienced financial loss often felt added stress, which sometimes contributed to crisis around affording basic utilities and food, and then lead to housing crisis. For some who were home schooling and working from home, the added stress put increased pressure on the family unit. For some, the sense of isolation, social disconnection lead to a sense of hopelessness and depression, for others, the loss of income and lack of support had led to suicide. Many spoke about the long term, severe and negative impacts on children’s health and wellbeing. And then others mentioned burnout of themselves, coworkers or friends largely due to increased pressures in working from home and homeschooling, lack of effective supports and being able to access supports, and how this has resulted in increased mental stress, and longer term affects related to anxiety and depression throughout the family unit. People also shared stories about the how they felt about the level of community support (or lack) from local and state government, the demand on services and shut down of services resulting in not being able to meet community needs.

Some talked about lack of social connection, digital divide (inability to afford devices, inaccessibility of data, internet quality, increased need for devices for homeschooling, ineffective communication or access to communication), increasing mistrust in the community in general and breakdown of social relationships.

Significantly, what the community are saying, and the stories they are sharing, describes clearly the breakdown of community strength and resilience, the weakening of and loss of all 3 levels of social capital (bridging, bonding and linking), including the collapse of networks, trust, relationships, shared values and collaboration. This is further exacerbated by the rapid and severe decline in the mental and emotional wellbeing across generations, and the inability of people to provide for their basic day to day necessities. These stories are supported by evidence at the local level, as well as at state levels, and echo what is occurring in communities across the state.

This describes the breaking down of the very fabric of our community.
We believe it is a **very serious call to action.**

NOT ACCESSING/ INEFFECTIVE SERVICES

“ I have multiple physical and mental health conditions, that require careful management from a team of experts, and many non-medical management technique (hydrotherapy, clinical pilates, regular physiotherapy, osteotherapy, massage).

My ability to access the support I need has been basically halted entirely. As a result, my conditions have worsened significantly, leaving me in increased pain, with worsened anxiety and depression.”

Local community member

“ So much has gone online, but some of us are excluded because Nillumbik does not have 100% internet coverage.

Living in ‘Metro Melbourne’ but do not have all services that the REAL suburbs have, because we are ACTUAL RURAL!”

Local community member

“ Can’t get through to anybody as they are inundated with calls. Too many people looking for help

Local community member

“ Help is coming from the community and small business. Whilst governments, councils and big business- continue to live their normal lives, doing nothing and earning their money.

It’s once again left to others to help and these people and businesses, I’m sure, are hurting too. But council haven’t waived rates! Helped people? Jobseeker is not available to many because of a partners income etc. no family payments or anything”

Local community member

“ Services are being used to the point where there is a waiting time for support, when support is needed urgently for food to feed the family.”

Local community member

“ I found there was no help for him or myself (following the suicide of my partner).

Even after this happened I had to wait 8 weeks to source any form of grief counselling.”

Local community member

WHAT LOCAL SERVICE PROVIDERS ARE SAYING

“ People are increasingly expressing signs of mental distress and are connecting with the service in a deeper way. ”

This increases the time it takes to serve people and requires more staff supervision and training.”

Local food relief service

“ We have definitely seen an increase in need both in financial & mental health issues across the community ”

Local food relief service

“The complex nature of peoples situations has increased significantly. this mean often assessments take 3 times as long and require much more specialised supports than what we can provide. we try to refer into other agencies but often the demand on those agencies means there is a long wait list, they don't answer the phone, or take a long time to call back meaning people can be left without shelter, are unsafe and without other supports for days and weeks ”

Local food relief service

“ There is still so much miscommunication about where to go and who is open. People are missing out on the help they need.

Local food relief service ”

“ People continue to experience complex financial situations that further entrench their situation. ”

Local food relief service

“ We are seeing an increase in people on disability pensions....an increase in clients with primary school aged children ”

Local food relief service

“ We are finding increasingly, people are incapable of coming and collecting food. Our incapacity to deliver food to people's homes is limited and we struggle with Limited volunteer capacity to do deliveries & government restrictions on deliveries ”

Local food relief service

“ No end in sight regarding easing of lockdown restrictions causing loss of hope for most families

Local food relief service

“ People think we aren't open, or that they're not allowed to travel for more than 5km, even if they are in an emergency ”

Local food relief service

CONCLUSION

Housing and food are the core needs of every individual without exception and these needs must be addressed before people can recover in other areas. These are basic human rights, that at the very fundamental core are the responsibility of government at all levels to address.

Volunteer based agencies and charities cannot be expected to be the sole means of responding to a crisis. They are often under resourced, unpaid, underfunded, and cannot sustain this need. Many agencies have provided support outside of their training, and outside of their scope of work. This not only is an issue for quick and sustainable responses, but may break rules of incorporation for those organisations if they continue with those new programs.

This emergency must be addressed like all others - it needs a proper strategy, a holistic approach, a genuine commitment to support those people who are residents in the areas and work from Federal, State, Local government levels partnering with local grass roots organisations. With the ability to pivot and respond as needed; but act for the long term not just a shutdown period of 2 weeks.

What should be most alarming to those who read this report is that agencies like DVCS and those brilliant community groups and other agencies that work in this space rely almost entirely on volunteers. Volunteers are the backbone of society. There is no doubt. We at DVCS value volunteering as a vehicle for community participation, active citizenship, an avenue for strengthening social participation, mental health and many other benefits. We love our volunteers.

However

Agencies like DVCS and others who provide this emergency relief support are now becoming **the front line and the end of the line**. As more organisations work remotely, shut their doors, cannot provide face to face contact, the end of the line lands with us – the churches, the neighbourhood houses, the volunteer-based organisations, the charities. We rely on the goodwill of our teams who are largely untrained, unpaid, and just beautiful community members who want to give back, to now deal with a state-wide emergency in mental health, family violence, housing crisis, financial crisis and more. Most did not sign up for this and it is not sustainable. This is not an acceptable response to a crisis or emergency. There is no other sector in the community support space that does this. Every other sector has paid, professionally trained, and supported teams.

Conclusion - Continued

We know agencies who have closed their doors since March 2020 for various reasons, who could not sustain the demand on their services.

Who fills the gap if these volunteers burn out? Who fills the gap when the goodwill runs out? Who fills the gaps when funding or resources are not available???? Many agencies can simply say NO we are not doing this, we are fortunate as a community many have taken on the challenge and changed.

Who fills the gap when emergency relief services close or reduce service? This is the next emergency.

What is local governments' responsibilities in a disaster, emergency?

From Municipal Association of Victoria:

“Councils play an important role in Victoria’s emergency management arrangements. They facilitate emergency management planning at the local level and are responsible for coordinating relief and recovery support for affected communities. They also have a long-established role in providing support to response agencies”.

This may not have been classed as an emergency, but it is a crisis; and the health crisis has created a financial and personal crisis for our residents, and this needs to follow a similar process in the way of collaboration, support, structure, funding etc as any bushfire/flood etc.

“Human services are a significant part of local government’s role in providing for the social wellbeing of communities. Councils undertake a critical role both in social planning and in the coordination and delivery of human services at the local level.” (Municipal Association of Victoria 2021)

What is needed now?

In-line with needs of the ER network, this report and the public survey we conducted, more support for food, mental health, domestic violence, housing and hardship.

- Skills and resources to deliver a more complex service.
- Funding for material aid.
- Funds for staff so organizations are long-term sustainable and can expand that service delivery without undue stresses on the 'regular structure' of those organisations.
- Better linkages into referral services that are clearly and accurately identified.
- Not reinventing the wheel but strengthening existing services.
- Change management support, with legal support, policy support, and 'a space to discuss need'.

What has worked well:

Food relief = local services stepped up and Mental health referrals = lots of services and pathways.

In two of these areas (mental health and food relief) there are well rounded and sustainable approaches that are well resourced and effective. Mental health receives a ton of funding, and there are 32 organisations in our region providing service. The Food Collective Project is a collective impact model that showcases the sustainability, agility and innovation of grassroots organisations collaboratively working together to address a need that one organisation could not address alone.

What didn't work well:

Housing and Domestic violence referrals = centralised, overrun, no alternative pathways.

In these two areas, the limited ability to gain access and support into the funded agencies has meant people in need missed out, and as this support is a personal crisis and potentially personal safety issue, they then find the agencies and charities that are open and hope they can help.

What does this mean?

It means what worked, used better relationships, more localised support and appropriate resources to complete the work. It also means significant change management was required by many organisations providing this local support who were not setup to deliver what is expected. This change happens automatically within business, and within all levels of government however within this crisis, volunteer lead organisations have been left to themselves to determine the need, react to that, fund that, and resource that. After 21 months, WHY IS THAT???

We hope this report provides insights and evidence of the challenges that organisations such as DVCS, and the community, are experiencing in responding to the hidden crisis.

By working together, this does not need to continue.

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