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A Crisis Provides Opportunity for the Commission

A key issue to watch when the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System hands down its final report in February, is the recommendations it provides to address housing security for those experiencing mental ill-health.

The assurance that comes with security of tenure and the associated feelings of safety and stability are crucial in helping people recover from mental ill-health. Having a safe, secure place to live is the foundation for mental health, as our Trajectories research showed.

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, in 2017-18 about one in three people aged 10 and above who sought help from a homelessness service in Australia reported mental health issues. Many of them have exited state psychiatric services and custodial institutions.

Hospitals and community mental health services sometimes having had little choice but to discharge people

into unsuitable accommodation, such as rooming houses or motels, or even homelessness.

This can lead to a relapse that can send the individual concerned back into hospital, often as part of a wider cycle through the social service system, adding to their levels of despair, pain and trauma.

This situation partly has its roots in deinstitutionalisation in Victoria the 1980s and 1990s. While the structural move to community-based care was a welcome reform, there was insufficient consideration to where people were going to live, placing the onus on families and informal carers to provide housing even when this may not be best option for the individual or their family.

Achieving better outcomes for people experiencing mental ill-health means looking at housing not just as an infrastructure issue, but also a health intervention to enable people to live fulfilling contributing lives.

The interim report from the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System failed to provide any recommendations to address housing, but we were provided hope that the final report would address this issue.

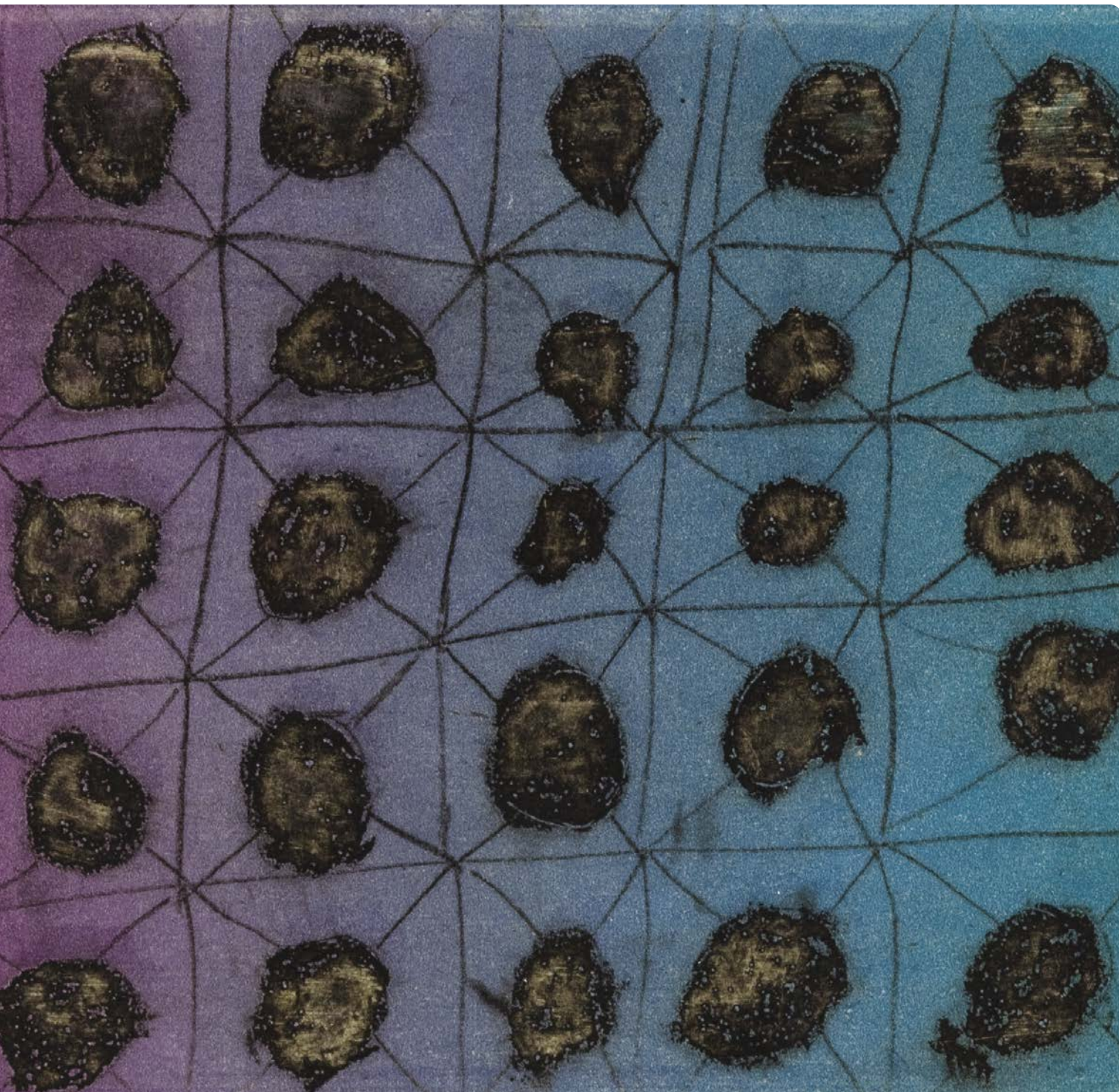
We think that Covid-19 has amplified the concerns around housing security, financial stress and mental health — demonstrating to the public and our decision makers what the Trajectories report laid bare — that they cannot be considered in isolation.

With the appointment of Australia's first deputy chief medical officer for mental health we now have recognition that mental health is as important as physical health. And with the issue of homelessness now



seen as a health concern to the wider community, we finally have some public understanding that what is good for the individual is good for a fairer and more equitable community.

This awareness from Covid-19, coupled with the once-in-a-lifetime Victorian Royal Commission and Productivity Commission inquiry into mental health, provides an unprecedented opportunity to act and finally deliver reform — a spectrum of safe and affordable housing for people experiencing complex mental health and those at risk, and a more integrated, caring system.



Untitled Pattern by Nancy Sumpner

When the Royal Commission hands down its findings in February we will be looking for a housing and mental health strategy with a clear recognition that housing is the foundation for mental health.

The strategy must include recommendations to address the following three groups of people.

Solutions for people who have housing, but need help to maintain tenancy to assist people to stabilise their housing and prevent them from experiencing homelessness. This includes

mental health training for real estate agents and landlords and assistance to maintain a tenancy such as budgeting, tenancy advice, resolving rent arrears and assistance to improve a person's financial situation such as help to find employment.

Housing options for people who need a medium-term intensive housing response that combines accommodation and support. Mind advocates for housing whereby supported accommodation is provided to people for a period of two to five years following

a period of serious illness to enable them to stabilise.

Housing for people who need specialised long-term housing and support. The Trajectories research shows that having access to stable, appropriate accommodation can be a circuit breaker which enables people to stabilise.

It is no exaggeration to say the Royal Commission is a once in a generation opportunity to improve Victoria's mental health system. Improved accommodation and housing must be central to this effort.