

# Media Release

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## Affordable homes help support older women in need – Homelessness Week 2022

Think homelessness couldn't happen to you? Neither did Helen Simmons.

Forty years ago, Helen, now aged 79, "had it all". A husband, three children, a nice house with a pool, many friends. It was the 80s; a time of dizzying highs and living large – until the stock market crashed – and then came the spectacular lows.

**August 1-7 is [Homelessness Week](#); raising awareness around people experiencing homelessness, and the action needed to achieve long-lasting solutions, including more social and affordable housing. Helen is one of 436 people aged over 55 living in [VMCH's 21 affordable homes](#) communities. She's also among the fastest growing cohort of people experiencing homelessness, women aged over 55. Around 90% of VMCH's affordable homes residents are female.**

The number of older Australian women accessing homelessness services has increased by 63% in the last five years ([The Australian Human Rights Commission – Older Women and Homelessness](#) (2019).

The [Retirement Living Council](#) reports "the largest proportion of older women facing homelessness in Australia have led conventional lives ... they've been employed, had stable homes and families. (Homelessness) is forced upon them after critical life events, like a relationship breakdown, financial troubles, or the onset of illness." They describe these women as "the missing middle".

Helen's story is an eerie reflection of these statements.

Back in the 80s, Helen's husband made some bad business decisions, and had (unbeknownst to her) remortgaged their house twice to stay afloat. When things went south, the stay-at-home mum found herself divorced and homeless.

She and the children moved in with her mother with not a penny to their name.

"I was completely blindsided," Helen recalls, "I was surprised how so many of my 'friends' disappeared. The whole experience was life-changing."

With three children to take care of, Helen sprang into action. Despite just a few years' experience as a teenage hairdresser, Helen secured a retail job with Katies and worked her way up to running its then bridal department.

The home front wasn't so stable. When Helen's parents passed away she was able to purchase a small unit with some money they'd left her. When her son started his own business years later, he bought her a beautiful home in Lower Plenty, but then was forced to sell when his business went under. Helen then moved in with her daughter, where she stayed for 10 years until it was recently time to leave.

The breast cancer survivor says a chance encounter with an old friend turned her life around. "She told me about VMCH's affordable homes but I didn't think they'd take me, I didn't have anything to give," she said. "But they accepted me anyway and now here I am, I love it. When I first came I asked if I could put anything up on the walls I was told 'of course, it's your forever home, do what you like'. To know this place was mine was amazing, I'd just wish I'd known about this earlier."

VMCH CEO Sonya Smart says providing affordable homes is part of the for-purpose organisation's mission to support the most vulnerable people in the community.

"All people, and especially older people, deserve to live in comfort with security and with dignity," she says. "There is a huge gap in housing for older people, particularly older women who are still very independent and many years away from requiring aged care services. That's why we continue to actively grow our affordable homes across Melbourne, including the development of a new and modern affordable homes community in Ford St, Ivanhoe East, and providing land for peppercorn leases (where the lease payments do not reflect the

fair value of the property being leased) for another 40-plus homes in Bundoora and Wantirna South through the Director of Housing.”

VMCH is also a supporter of the [Everybody's Home](#) campaign, which calls for an additional 500,000 social and affordable homes to be built by 2026.

### Media enquiries

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## About VMCH

Here at VMCH, our services are as diverse as the people we support.

Our values underpin the work we do. As a Catholic, for-purpose organisation, compassion, respect and inclusion aren't just words to us, they guide us in everything we do.

While we've been around for over a century, we're always moving forward. Always staying true to who we are by supporting people and families to live their best lives; providing a place to call home and spaces to learn and grow.

Our professional and compassionate teams are with you on your life journey; helping you with a wide range of support from early learning and therapy, specialist education, disability services, affordable homes, residential aged care, retirement living and at-home aged care.

