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What does it *take* and *mean* to sustain a tenancy and prevent homelessness?

An empirical study of Micah Projects' sustaining tenancies programs

Cameron Parsell, Nikita Sharma, Rose Stambe, Ella Kuskoff, Paul Davidraj, and Jade Kozionas

Authors	<p>Professor Cameron Parsell, <i>The University of Queensland</i></p> <p>Dr Nikita Sharma, <i>The University of Queensland</i></p> <p>Dr Rose Stambe, <i>The University of Queensland</i></p> <p>Dr Ella Kuskoff, <i>The University of Queensland</i></p> <p>Paul Davidraj, <i>Micah Projects</i></p> <p>Jade Kozionas, <i>Micah Projects</i></p>
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Prepared for	<p>Micah Projects</p> <p>162 Boundary St</p> <p>West End QLD 4101</p> <p>Australia</p> <p>https://micahprojects.org.au/</p>
Prepared by	<p>School of Social Science</p> <p>The University of Queensland</p> <p>St Lucia Campus</p> <p>Level 3, Michie Building (#9)</p> <p>Brisbane Qld 4072</p> <p>Australia</p> <p>Email c.parsell@uq.edu.au</p>
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

This report presents the results of an empirical study that investigated the nature, experience, and impact of Micah Projects' sustaining tenancies programs. The study contributes empirical knowledge to underpin the strategies and practices of governments and community organisations to support people at risk of losing their tenancies to sustain housing and to prevent homelessness. In the past two decades, there has been an extensive and impressive body of scientific knowledge produced about ending homelessness for individuals, especially for people who are chronically homeless and defined as having complex and often unmet needs (Padgett et al. 2016). This body of research reflects the primary focus of policy and practice efforts to work with people who are homeless. Working with people who are homeless, for the purposes of ending their homelessness, is appropriate and indeed desirable. A consequence of this focus has been limited attention and research on funding, models, and practices to sustain tenancies for people at risk of losing their housing and entering homelessness (Holl et al. 2016).

Rather than a broad focus on tenancy sustainment, which includes challenging the simple binary that sustained tenancy equates to a positive outcome and exited tenancy constitutes a negative outcome (Taylor & Johnson 2022), this study specifically examines the work to support people at risk of losing their tenancy to sustain housing and avoid homelessness. This focus on the intersection between sustaining tenancies and preventing homelessness is important as it enables examination and identification of individual and systems practices that address the risk of housing loss and entry into homelessness. When people who are at risk of losing their housing and entering homelessness do sustain their tenancies, it provokes important questions about what this means to them, what practices enabled it, and under what circumstances this outcome is likely or unlikely to be achieved.

Although there is a body of research that illustrates a range of strategies to underpin sustaining tenancies programs and interventions (as discussed in the next chapter), there is limited contemporary evidence about what practices are required to sustain tenancies for people at risk of eviction and entering homelessness. It is rather the case that the broad and nebulous term 'support' is used without practical or conceptual clarity about what support actually looks like in practice and what it means to be supported. Moreover, the literature that does exist presents sustaining tenancies as something that is achieved by housing models, programs, and the practices of service providers. There is little research that documents what people do, in collaboration with support and housing providers, to sustain their tenancies. There is likewise little information available about what sustaining a tenancy means from the perspective of people who were or are at risk of eviction.

Further, it is important to examine the relationship between work to sustain tenancies for people at risk of entering homelessness and specific cohorts. People with high vulnerabilities compared to people with low vulnerabilities are at a greater risk of losing their tenancies and entering

homelessness (Petry et al., 2021). Notwithstanding significant data limitations, this research seeks to identify whether there are cohorts for whom sustaining tenancies programs are insufficient to meet their need, and whether permanent supportive housing constitutes a more appropriate response.

Despite the lack of evidence and explicit focus, governments and societies broadly do intervene, both explicitly and implicitly, to support people at risk of eviction entering homelessness. It is within this practice context and knowledge limitations that this research aims to contribute.

The study addresses three research questions

1. What is done to sustain tenancies for people at risk of entering homelessness?
2. What does it mean to sustain a tenancy for people at risk of entering homelessness?
3. What are the implications of sustained tenancies for people's quality of life?

The study focuses on both single adults with no dependent children and families, as defined by at least one parent with at least one dependent child. The sustaining tenancies support with individuals is delivered through Micah Projects' Homeless to Home team, whereas the sustaining tenancies support with families is part of Micah Projects' Homestay team. With the opportunity to examine the two cohorts these two teams engage, the research specifically investigates what, if any, differences exist in the work and meaning of sustaining tenancies and avoiding homelessness for families compared to single people.

Why sustain tenancies to prevent homelessness?

There are at least three compelling reasons why forced exits from housing and the work to sustain tenancies for people at risk of entering homelessness are significant. These are described below and summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The implications of forced exits from housing



Without doubt, and first, failed tenancies harm the individual who is evicted or forced out of housing under negative circumstances. Many people at risk of eviction leave prior to the formal eviction process (Beer et al., 2006). It is difficult to define being forced out of housing under negative circumstances, and the data to demonstrate it is difficult to access. In addition to a formal court order eviction, we conceptualise being forced out of housing under negative circumstances as leaving with unresolved breaches or entering homelessness upon exit (Perales et al., 2024).

People who are evicted from housing or otherwise forced to leave in the absence of a court order are at a significant risk of homelessness (Holl et al., 2016). Leaving tenancies because of formal evictions or other undesirable exits, compared to leaving voluntarily or under desirable conditions, is associated with poorer health and housing outcomes (Cusack & Montgomery 2017). Evictions often exacerbate marginalisation by not only causing stress, but also by forcing people into unstable and dangerous situations. Desmond's (2016) work from the United States demonstrates that evictions are a catalyst for entrenching poverty and exclusion from mainstream housing and people's social networks and supports. For families with dependent children, eviction and forced exits from housing can force people to leave neighbourhoods, which disconnects children from schools, childcare, and other formal and informal support networks (Desmond 2016).

Second, evictions and forced exits from housing and unsustainable tenancies are problematic, and should be avoided, because they add to the operating cost of housing providers. Taylor and Johnson (2022) note that the costs associated with responding to failing tenancies, and then the additional costs of re-tenanting and general churn, can threaten the financial viability of housing providers. Holl et al. (2016) draw on the European literature to show that evictions can cost housing providers anywhere from 3,500 to 11,000 Euros. If people forced out of housing enter the homelessness systems, then there are additional societal costs associated (Holl et al. 2016).

Third, eviction undermines neighbourhood stability. Evictions subvert the capacity of citizens to realise objectives to build place-based social capital (Pawson & Munro 2010). Evicting people overlooks that housing can be experienced as home (Toy-Cronin & Bierre 2022). Most Australian social housing tenants intend to stay in their housing either permanently or for an extended period (Wiesel & Pawson 2015). Existing research likewise demonstrates that stability and long-term tenancies enable people to build and experience home (Fitzpatrick & Watts 2017).

Research design

The research draws on a mixed-method research design. First, we conducted in-depth interviews with tenants who were participating in sustaining tenancies support programs (n=29). Of these 29 participants, 16 were adults with no dependent children in the household and 13 were parents with at least one dependent child in the household. With the use of a semi-structured interview guide, in-depth interviews sought to understand how participants engaged with sustaining tenancies support, what they found useful, what support and housing needs were not met, and what support and housing meant to them.

Second, we conducted in-depth interviews with professionals employed in sustaining tenancies support programs (n=12). These participants included leaders/supervisors of sustaining tenancies programs (n=3), support workers engaged with adults with no dependent children (n=5), and support workers engaged with parents (n=4). Informed by a semi-structured interview guide, in-depth interviews examined the model of practice, including mode of engagement, the use of assessment tools, work with housing providers and other professionals, people's assessments on what does and does not work well to prevent entries into homelessness, and who the support does and does not work well for.

Third, the research draws on observations of the delivery of sustaining tenancies support work. Observations were focused on the work that is conducted by sustaining tenancies support

workers, including their practice-based interactions with participants. Whereas the in-depth interviews sought to understand sustaining tenancies support as a model, the observations sought to examine the model in practice.

Fourth, we analysed quantitative administrative data on participants (n=1133) in sustaining tenancies support programs. The data spans from 1 January 2021 to 10 May 2024. The data provides information on many aspects of people's engagement with the sustaining tenancies support programs. It includes both individual participants (n=466) and family units (n=265). Within the family units, there are 667 participants. Specifically, we have data on participants' demographic characteristics, the start and end date of the support period, participants' needs, support services and activities, and planned actions. Importantly, we also have data from the Service Prioritisation Decision Assistance Tool (SPDAT) that assesses the participants' vulnerabilities and wellness, and their need for housing interventions.

We drew on this data to understand who participated in the program, when and how participants engaged with the program, and how participants were supported in sustaining their tenancies. We also investigated participants' outcome at the end of the support period i.e., whether participants were in secure accommodation at the end of the program. To this end, we analysed participants' demographic characteristics, source of referrals, duration of support period and time spent providing support services and activities. We tabulated and summarised key information to gather evidence on participants' engagement with the programs. Where sample sizes allowed, we assessed the strength of the quantitative evidence using tests of statistical significance.

We also drew on Micah Projects' brokerage data to understand an important source of funding used to assist people sustain their tenancies. As demonstrated, brokerage funding was used in diverse ways to support participants to enable them to access required services and activities.

Chapter 2: What does the literature say about sustaining tenancies?

Introduction

Since at least the year 2000, scholars from around the world have developed a body of knowledge about what it takes to sustain a tenancy. In an early contribution to the field, Crane and Warnes (2000) offer an important observation about sustaining housing by drawing attention to evictions. Analysing the situation of people who were evicted from housing into homelessness, they report that many had statutory agencies aware of the tenancy problems prior to the formal eviction being issued. Despite this knowledge, statutory agencies did not refer on or link people experiencing tenancy problems into appropriate support services. They conclude that:

eviction and homelessness could have been prevented if appropriate referrals had been made as their difficulties mounted. Many did not require intensive support to remain at home, and might have been able to manage if they had received low-level but frequent help (Crane & Warnes 2000, 769).

This is an important observation. It has not only been empirically substantiated with subsequent research, but also because it helps frame eviction beyond the problems of the evicted tenant. We can see evictions as a failure of the housing and support systems to adequately meet the needs of some individuals; individuals for whom professionals within the service system hold knowledge about the risks of tenancy failure.

What makes a sustainable tenancy?

If it can be concluded that evictions are a systems failure because they, or at least many of them, could be prevented, the question is: what successfully prevents eviction? The literature offers responses to this question that touch on several domains. Collins et al.'s (2022) analysis from Canada shows that evictions and entry into homelessness are prevented when vulnerable tenants have access to support providers. They do not provide detailed evidence of what support is required, but they do note the importance of the tenancy manager having contact with a tenant's support provider as a means to address issues placing a tenancy at risk.

In an analysis from New Zealand, Toy-Cronin and Bierre (2022) observe that the mediation process to reconcile rent arrears does not take into account that housing is home. They advocate for legislative change that recognises housing as home, which would protect tenants by affording them more power in legal proceedings when faced with eviction.

Other literature identifies the work conducted by tenant managers/housing providers that creates sustainable tenancies. The Guinness Partnership (2015) from the United Kingdom for example, says that housing providers enable sustainable tenancies through decisions about rent, tenure type and mix, as well as infrastructure. Pawson and Munro (2010) offer more detail by presenting empirical analysis of the social landlord practices that contribute to early (and undesirable) exits

and sustained tenancies. They found neighbourhood conflict, locational needs not being met, loneliness, and a lack of furniture all contribute to people leaving tenancies earlier. They recommended that tenancy managers should promote sustainment through, for instance, addressing anti-social behaviour, improving the quality of housing stock, and proactively responding to rental arrears (Pawson & Munro 2010). From this research we can see that the allocation of housing, including the type and location of housing, and integration of support with housing, can contribute to either sustainability or forced tenancy loss.

A recent Australian study found that tenancy sustainment was enabled through the caring relationships of social housing tenancy managers, and in turn tenancy breakdown was a product of broken relationships (Lewis 2024). The relationships reported by Lewis (2024) were underpinned by an ethics of care. Lewis argued that social housing tenancy managers progressed an ethics of care through a network of reciprocal relationships that involved tenants, support providers, and tenancy managers. There is a clear recognition in the literature that sustaining tenancies to avoid eviction requires support providers. This recognition notwithstanding, there is limited detail about what specific practices constitute the provision of support.

Boland et al. (2023) identified the importance of supporting people to make their new housing home as a means to enable tenancy sustainment and to avoid re-entering homelessness. They argued that creating conditions for home was about empowering tenants to control daily activities in their lives, to participate in meaningful activities, and to develop a sense of belonging. For Boland et al. (2023), support to help people sustain tenancies is about support to help people live well and meaningful lives. This conclusion is consistent with the findings of Bowpitt and Harding (2009) who conducted research with people who misused substances who exited homelessness. They argued that a narrow and exclusive focus on preventing homelessness was inadequate. Rather, Bowpitt and Harding (2009) found that for homelessness exits to be sustainable, support was required to help tenants focus on the future and to build meaningful relationships, including with families and neighbours. This is significant, they argued, because sustaining tenancies and avoiding entry into homelessness requires enabling people to become socially integrated into a society to benefit from formal and informal supports.

The important observation from Boland et al. (2023) and Bowpitt and Harding (2009) that sustaining tenancies for people at risk of re-entering homelessness requires supporting people to live well underlies the almost infinite supports and resources that are effective. In terms of resources, Shinn and Cohen (2019) show that “there is strong evidence for the effectiveness of permanent deep rental housing subsidies in preventing homelessness among poor families.”

A recent systematic review of homelessness prevention for single adults with multiple exclusion homelessness illustrates this well (Woellenstein et al., 2023). Although not stating this explicitly, their review essentially concludes that it is a well-functioning welfare state that prevents homelessness, including permanent housing, financial assistance, case management, outreach, mental health care, joint mental health and substance use care, legal support, and other social supports. Under these broad topics they provide more specificity, such as assistance with rent or assistance accessing and sustaining employment. The review demonstrates that supporting people who are at risk of homelessness to sustain housing requires meeting a diverse array of needs. Boland et al. (2018) add to the vast array of factors that contribute to tenancy

sustainment for people who have experienced homelessness to include social support from family members.

This literature on the societal resources and points of intervention that prevent eviction and entry (or re-entry) into homelessness connects to the related body of work on the individual (such as addiction), practice (including housing polices), and structural conditions (i.e., housing affordability) that are associated with people being pushed out of housing and into homelessness (Holl et al., 2016). As with the Woollenstein et al. (2023) systematic review, the systematic review conducted by Holl et al. (2016, 544) illustrated the great diversity of activities that aim to prevent eviction, the varied duration they are provided, and concluded “a comparison of these interventions is impossible.” They also observed that even when research demonstrates an intervention has prevented an eviction (and possible entry into homelessness), it is not possible to determine whether eviction was prevented or merely postponed. Studies that seek to build evidence about the long-term impacts of work to sustain tenancies are frequently hampered by a lack on longitudinal and linked data.

As noted, there are a multitude of resources and modes of intervention that contribute to tenancy sustainment and prevention of entries into homelessness. The point from Holl et al. (2016) about whether homelessness was prevented or simply postponed is important. Piña and Pirog (2019) make a similar point based on analysis from the United States. They found that the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program was associated with a reduction in homelessness among students. The impact of this prevention program, however, fades as the resources, in the form of short-term financial assistance, end.

Conclusion

The literature raises important findings that will be examined in the present study about what is done to contribute to sustained tenancies and prevention of homelessness. In particular, the study will focus on practices that assist, including in the short-term, people to respond to problems placing their tenancy at risk, as well as practices that seek to effect systems changes to enable tenancy sustainment.

Chapter 3: Practices of sustaining tenancies

Chapter overview

This chapter investigates the complex challenges that underpin people's risk of losing their housing, as well as the practices involved in supporting participants to sustain their tenancies and avoid entering (including re-entering) homelessness. In particular, the chapter maps participants' engagement with sustaining tenancies programs, from their initial pathway into the programs through to sustaining tenancy workers' practices of gaining participant consent, building rapport, and working in non-judgemental and participant-led ways to address participants' layers of needs.

Eligibility and pathways

The research focused on sustaining tenancies programs that engage people who are predominantly residing in social housing. In most cases in our data, this housing was public housing and, to a lesser extent, community housing. A small number, approximately seven per cent of participants, reside in the private rental market. Of the participants residing in private rental, the vast majority, approximately 87 per cent, are families.

There are three primary pathways into sustaining tenancies programs. First, people engage at the point of tenancy commencement as part of a continuum of support from street outreach into housing. Rather than working with an individual to respond to an identified problem that is placing the tenancy at risk, the continuum of support from rough sleeping into housing is a preventative mechanism based on the challenges people may experience at the transition. The majority of participants in sustaining tenancies programs, some 64 per cent, engage through the continuum of support from outreach. Engagement into sustaining tenancies programs as a continuum of support from outreach into housing is deemed to be particularly important as it ensures that participants do not experience a disconnection and finalisation of support when they access housing. As we demonstrate below, the continuum of support means that participants are provided the initial resources they require to set up their housing and feel connected to services that enable them to navigate the transition from homelessness.

A sustaining tenancies support worker explained the engagement with the program for people who had moved from homelessness – typically rough sleeping – into housing:

We will have an understanding that they've lived on the streets for a long time. So, they're being housed and having to put their money towards a lease now, like rent rather than what they were doing on the streets. It's a whole new perspective of living for them. We're there kind of as a safety net, to ensure that they're able to sustain that tenancy, or we set the expectations of kind of like, ensuring that it's like a seamless transition.

A participant who had spent multiple years sleeping rough endorsed this sentiment. Referring to their housing, which they had resided in for just under one year after moving from rough sleeping, they said:

Participant: Very grateful. But you know it's really goes without saying, the transition across took some getting used to. That's the worst part.

Interviewer: What was it like getting used to it?

Participant: Not easy.

Another participant reported likewise. They referred to moving into housing after rough sleeping as:

Participant: It was trippy to be indoors, like, not just in a tent, but indoors.

Interviewer: Did it take you a bit to get used to it. Or did you like, straight away?

Participant: Took me a bit to get used to. I went back to the street. Went camping again with my cousin, sister, and uncle, who were homeless on the street... You can't really, when you transitioning from the street, you'll always go back to it, because you're still transitioning to stop being on the street, because your mentality is trained to survive on the street. Yeah, you're used to it.

Interviewer: Are you still there now, or do you think you've transitioned into this space?

Participant: You can kind of tell when someone's transition is when they stop camping on the street.

Interviewer: How does it feel living here now?

Participant: Feels good to have a place.

Engagement at the point of tenancy commencement as part of a continuum of support illustrates the importance of conceptualising (and funding) sustaining tenancies support programs as part of a wider eco-system that includes direct and explicit links to assertive street outreach. The assertive street outreach that supports people from rough sleeping into housing is well placed to initiate the continuum of support to enable people to sustain their tenancy once housed.

Second, people can be referred directly from their tenancy manager because they have identified risks to the sustainability of the tenancy. Of all of the people participating in sustaining tenancies support programs, 20 per cent were referred by their tenancy manager. The below participant was referred by their tenancy manager shortly after commencing their social housing tenancy. They explained:

Participant: Had a bit of trouble when I first moved in, as you can see by the wall.

Interviewer: What happened?

Participant: I was permanently drunk. It took me a fair while to work that one. I'm sober most of the time now.

Third, referrals into sustaining tenancies programs come from a diverse section of society. Some people are referred in from friends or family. A small number of participants self-referred into sustaining tenancies programs. Other participants are referred in from the statutory child protection authority or not-for-profit organisations working with participants to address child protection concerns. Approximately 16 per cent of participants are referred through these diverse sources.

As one sustaining tenancies support worker observed, if the statutory child protection authority receives reports of concerns that are “not going to be a child protection intervention. It's going to need sustaining tenancies, we get referrals.” They further commented that the sustaining tenancies team will also receive referrals from service providers who are transitioning their clients out, even if there is not an explicit tenancy risk. The sustaining tenancies support worker explained, “we do get a lot of referrals that are just family problems. And we redirect them on.”

As we demonstrate below, there are often a range of life problems that underpin risks to the sustainability of tenancies. It is a challenge for non-housing providers to know whether a problem an individual or family is experiencing is also a problem that is placing their tenancy at risk. Often this is only known retrospectively. For participants to be accepted into sustaining tenancies programs, however, there must be a problem that is placing the tenancy at risk (including the risk associated with transitioning from homelessness to housing) rather than a general life problem with no clear link to tenancy issues.

In addition to the three pathways into sustaining tenancies programs for issues specifically related to risks of losing housing, for the referral to be accepted the tenancy manager must be willing to work with the participant to address the issues placing the tenancy at risk. This underlies a degree of collaboration required between the sustaining tenancies support workers and the tenancy managers for the model to function. In practice, this means that participants will not be accepted into sustaining tenancies programs if action has already been taken to progress eviction through the courts. As a sustaining tenancies support worker observed, their service is not to be seen by the housing provider as:

We're evicting you. But here's a support agency that will find you a boarding house.
And it's like, well, yeah, that's not what we're here for.

The above points to an important nuance about referrals into the program, who sustaining tenancies programs are for, and what they aim to achieve. To be eligible, people need to be experiencing problems that are placing their tenancy at risk, but the tenancy manager must be willing to work with the participant to address the risk. This nuance provides a sense of the core aims of sustaining tenancies programs vis-à-vis the point of intervention and anticipated outcome.

Aim

Rather than providing support to a person to deal with eviction, sustaining tenancies support programs aim to stabilise housing and prevent homelessness. Support workers were adamant that their jobs entailed making “sure someone doesn't get evicted to ensure that they don't re-enter the cycle of homelessness.” Indeed, they observed that the state housing authority engage sustaining tenancies programs because “now that we're working towards the same goal.” For

sustaining tenancies support programs to operate effectively, there needs to be not only collaboration between housing and support providers (as we demonstrate below), but also a shared vision to support people to retain housing and avoid homelessness.

The overarching aim to prevent homelessness through sustained housing rather than support a person at imminent eviction dictates the nature of the work delivered by sustaining tenancies support workers. The support workers emphasise the importance of flexibility and responsiveness. As one support worker described it when asked what work they prioritise: “the most critical issue that they're experiencing at that time, that would put the tenancy at risk.”

When shadowing a support worker in the field we observed this prioritisation of the issue placing the tenancy at risk as well as flexibly responding to an individual's immediate need. As the support worker was on the road they received a call from a tenancy manager at the statutory housing authority. The tenancy manager, who knew the support worker was engaged supporting the individual participant, advised that the participant had received significant neighbourhood complaints about allegedly throwing and smashing glass bottles outside their property.

When the support worker attended the participant's home, there was smashed glass on the ground, the participant had visible wounds from the glass and blood-stained floors. The participant had been consuming alcohol prior to the visit even though they were aiming for sobriety, and they spoke about addiction and feeling overwhelmed with their tenancy. In one interaction of approximately 30 minutes, the support worker responded to the immediate need by organising for a nurse to visit to administer wound care (with the participant's consent). The support worker explained to the participant the concerns of the tenancy manager and their tenancy obligations. In addition, they provided information about the health and addiction services that were available and offered to provide a warm referral into the services. The support worker also encouraged the participant to remove the broken glass to mitigate the risk of further injury to themselves, neighbours, and visiting service providers. The support worker also offered the participant the opportunity to transport them to the housing authority office to jointly meet with the tenancy manager to help address the current concerns. In the fortnight previous to this interaction the support worker had transported the participant to the housing authority to meet with the tenancy manager to develop a plan to address the tenancy issues.

The above example illustrates both the complex challenges that people at risk of eviction experience and the multiple modes of support that are provided under sustaining tenancies programs. It likewise provides a picture of the way that support alone is not a simple solution to problems placing tenancies at risk. In terms of the former, the broken glass on communal areas of the apartment block, which the participant said he had caused through smashing bottles when intoxicated and frustrated by the neighbours, clearly illustrates problems that neighbours and tenancy managers would have legitimate concerns about. It illustrates a problem that, if not addressed, could lead to eviction.

Further, the addiction that the participant disclosed, their uncertainty about engaging in treatment and speculation about instead returning to homelessness, coupled with the ongoing nature of this problem, demonstrates that solving the issues placing the tenancy at risk are far from simple. First, the participant needs to decide to abstain from alcohol and engage with treatment services. Second, there needs to be treatment services that are available and

accessible at a time congruent with the participant's wishes. Third, the abstinence and treatment need to be successful. Fourth, the tenancy manager must be willing to hold the property for the participant if they are away for an extended period, for example to engage with long-term residential rehabilitation. Given the neighbourhood conflict, it is also possible that the participant will not want to return to the property, and/or the neighbours will protest about the participant remaining in their current property. Indeed, participants are conscious that when supported to address risks to their tenancies, the problems that exist at the neighbourhood level may persist and thus tenancy sustainability is uncertain. The below participant explained how the support they received to sustain their tenancy was assistance to obtain a transfer to avoid the neighbourhood issues that placed their tenancy at risk.

And that's what they did with me with [suburb]; I didn't have to lose my home. I didn't get a notice to leave, but they knew, because of the circumstances, it was best for me to get a transfer, that I knew not to go back there, because I knew it would just escalate and wouldn't end well for me or for a couple of the other tenants. It wasn't fair on us, so I stayed here, and then [sustaining tenancies support worker] did all that hard work behind the closed doors, and then I get this, what amazing phone call, and I get this place.

Working *with* participants

A focus on the aim to sustain tenancies to avoid homelessness can gloss over the sophisticated practice required. As hinted at from the examples above about addiction and neighbourhood conflict, sustaining tenancies support workers engage with people in crisis under trying circumstances. Indeed, their remit is to engage with an individual or family when problems are identified to be so significant that there is a reasonable risk of eviction. Building on the example above, it is important to gain a further sense of the practices, which encompass the interpersonal skills and professional expertise required to support people to address tenancy problems.

Sustaining tenancies workers make clear, and participants are likewise conscious, that engagement with the programs is voluntary. Irrespective of the pathway in or the type of housing a participant resides in, people engage with sustaining tenancies programs as voluntary participants. There is no requirement for people to participate. As one support worker said clearly, "so the tenant has to give consent."

From a practice perspective, the first engagement with a participant is about first ensuring consent – even though participants need to consent to their housing or other support provider, including assertive street outreach, prior to being engaged in sustaining tenancies programs. Sustaining tenancies support workers explained that participants often give consent to their tenancy manager to participate in a sustaining tenancies program, yet they do not know what the program entails nor what participation involves. A support worker said that they had observed tenancy managers refer to their program because of risks to tenancies (appropriately), but the tenancy manager may not fully understand what the sustaining tenancies programs deliver. Therefore participants are consenting, but they are not cognisant of what they are consenting to. At the point of initial engagement with a participant, a support worker pointed out "it's our job to kind of elaborate. Yeah touch base on what we can do for them; about how hands on we can be. Setting expectations."

This approach both ensured that people are providing voluntary consent and that they understand what work they and support workers can progress collectively. For this collective work to be realised, support workers are required to build rapport with participants. The research identified three core ways in which the critical rapport was established. First, and partially attributed to the majority of participants (64 per cent) engaging with sustaining tenancies programs as part of a continuum of support that commenced with assertive street outreach, they had already developed trust and rapport with support workers from the same organisation. In some cases, assertive street outreach workers from Micah Projects were able to directly introduce the participant they were working with to access housing to the new Micah Projects worker who would support them in the sustaining tenancies program. This continuity meant that an important degree of rapport and trust was already established.

Second, participants spoke about developing rapport and trust with their support workers when they did not feel judged. The importance of identifying and acknowledging the strengths in participants was identified by sustaining tenancies support workers as paramount. This included, for example, acknowledging the care that parents provide to their children. Building rapport through a non-judgemental and respectful approach was particularly important as participants were aware that they were engaging with sustaining tenancies programs for reasons that they understood could be contrary to social norms. A participant recalled an experience that helped them connect with and trust their sustaining tenancies support worker. The participant recalled:

So [sustaining tenancies support worker's] been happy to come here, which has been really helpful. And one time I was having a full-on, like full textbook mental breakdown, like it was epic, and [sustaining tenancies support worker] called me right at that time. And I was like, in my mind, snapping arms and she's like, "I can come over, like now if you want to be there," and I said "that'd be great". So she came over and she's like, she's here. She's really not judgmental at all. It's just, yeah, I couldn't have asked for a better support work.

Third, rapport is achieved through a participant-led approach that is solution focused. A support worker explained this dual approach when first engaging with a participant:

So going out and going, hey, we got this referral because we heard that there's a bit of property damage we could help you with. Not going, how is that property damage caused? What did you do? What did you contribute to that and putting the blame on them. Actually going, ok, well, what can we do to help you address that property damage? Maybe that's the first thing addressing the property damage. And then the next conversation is, what about the property damage because those holes in that wall kind of looked like they were the level of someone's fist. Oh yeah, actually, there's some DV going. And then you open up a whole new world of work to get done.

We observed the practices of sustaining tenancies support workers that reflected the sentiments reported above: sustaining tenancies work first involves building rapport and trust, which then sets the parameters for collaborative work that helps people identify and address what are often multiple layers of problems that impact their tenancies. Building rapport to establish a successful working relationship is often enabled through achieving small yet practical outcomes that the participant finds meaningful. As one support worker noted:

Like providing practical support is a great way to build rapport, just in itself. And like, people see, you know, you're getting runs on the board, or, you know, linking with this worker is actually worthwhile, because I'm getting stuff out of it.

A participant recalled an experience with their sustaining tenancies worker that illustrated both participant-led and solution-focused practice. The participant had organised for a friend to transport them to an important medical appointment, but the friend “completely stood me up and I was just crying.” The participant said that “I don't know if I'll get back on the waitlist” for the appointment. Distressed, the participant recalled:

But then I thought of [sustaining tenancies support worker] and I gave her a call and she instantly called the taxi straightaway, so I made that appointment. That was that was huge, huge to be able to make that appointment because I am going for the Disability Support Pension and that pain specialist appointment is really, really crucial for it.

Sustaining tenancies support work is enhanced with the contributions of the Queensland Community Support scheme. This scheme provides the staffing and resources, such as assisting with regular household tasks, accessing essential services, and managing appointments, to achieve the participant-led and solution-focused practice. Further, the practical support helped foster rapport that enabled deeper collaborative work to progress. Although it is often clear to the tenancy manager what the immediate problem is – for instance, rental arrears, property damage, neighbourhood complaints – the problem(s) that underly these can be both difficult to discern and respond to. Building rapport to enable participants to open up to discuss their situation, including providing transport, is critical.

The sustaining tenancies workers use an assessment tool to facilitate a systematic understanding of the participants' needs to inform their work. The tool is the Service Prioritisation Decision Assistance Tool, referred to by the acronym SPDAT. The SPDAT measures 15 components of a person's life. The developer of the SPDAT, Org Code (<https://www.orgcode.com/blog/spdat>), says that the tool assists workers at intake and through case management to ensure that they focus on where the service user is through a client centred and strengths based approach. Moreover, the tool, because it is intended to be used periodically, can demonstrate “movement – and momentum – in various dimensions of their case plan.”

The sustaining tenancies support workers use an iPad to record the information obtained from the questions outlined in the SPDAT. Although the SPDAT is designed as a systematic tool to obtain consistent and robust data, we observed support staff skilfully integrate the questions from the SPDAT into general conversation with participants. The SPDAT was thus not used as an add on to practice, but rather a tool that formed part of engagement and day-to-day work with participants. A support worker, when asked about their approach to using the SPDAT that was observed in the field, described this approach as useful for ensuring engagement and a productive working partnership.

I just tried to drop it into normal conversation. Just like, how are you going with court?
Is there any legal stuff going on? Just normal conversations.

The sustaining tenancies support worker went on to explain that for the SPDAT to help identify a participant's needs and an appropriate response, it needed to be used in a way that reflects how people like to be engaged. This meant prioritising the participants' needs over the structure of the tool. A sustaining tenancies support worker reported, for example:

It's definitely important not to have that pressure to get it done all in one sitting, because then it can feel a bit forced. And it doesn't come as naturally. The conversational type of approach is where you tend to extract more information. It's a bit more relaxed.

The relaxed approach was important because the tool and the information that it facilitated gathering was important for sustaining tenancies workers to develop a full and informed understanding of their participants' needs. A support worker captures the way the SPDAT gives a broad picture into someone's life circumstances and needs. Referring to the SPDAT, they said it "gives you like a whole rounded view into someone's life." The support worker was asked to elaborate on how the SPDAT provides the whole rounded view. They provided an example that will be critical to keep in mind when considering the below discussion on the multiple layers of need underlying risks to tenancy:

So you can ask them what their issues are. And then they're gonna probably talk about the most prominent, the one that's at the forefront of their mind. Could be you know, we had someone last week say that the reason that they haven't paid rent is because their Centrelink was cut off. So that's, you know, money is really important in that moment, but then you go to realise, like, the reason why they haven't gone to Centrelink is because their health is really bad. Their mental health is deteriorating. So if you were to just ask, what do you need to sustain this tenancy, they might just say, I need to go to Centrelink. I need to report. But it's like what will actually prevent you from reporting so at least [the SPDAT] gives you an overview of all the different factors in their life that could be contributing.

In this extensive passage, the support worker illustrates not only the multiple layers of problems that result in risks to tenancy sustainment, but also the way the systematic questions across the 15 components of the SPDAT enabled an understanding of these issues to be canvassed.

If the support worker had only asked the participant what the tenancy problem was, consistent with what the tenancy manager observed, they would have stayed at the presenting and intuitive problem that it was failure to pay rent because of no income. By using the SPDAT and integrating it into a conversation that centres building rapport and identifying what is important for the participant, the support worker was able to glean the underlying mental health issues that explained why the person was not reporting their income to Centrelink – as required – and thus why their income support payment was suspended. This more detailed information is both an accurate reflection of the participant's needs and a mechanism to progress practice that can meet those needs to address risks of eviction.

As a support worker said when referring to what the SPDAT represents for their work, "the information that I get from the participants every time sets the expectations of what I should be focusing on during my next engagement." The SPDAT is a practical guide to ensure that the sustaining tenancies work is participant focused. This was perceived as particularly important by

participants. They felt that they were not heard by mainstream systems, and by sustaining tenancies workers being participant-led, they felt heard. As one participant remarked when talking about drug paraphernalia being discarded around the premises of their social housing:

We've had to clean [drug paraphernalia] up, you know, in the morning walking to school and start there. So, yeah, that's been really full on. So I'm glad I've had [sustaining tenancies support worker] to support me, because I don't think I would have, like, mentally coped here, but I'd feel alone, like, without [sustaining tenancies support worker], I do feel really alone, because Housing just don't listen like they don't hear us.

As we demonstrate below, the research found that the sustaining tenancies support programs work optimally when a participants' immediate and underlying needs can be both identified and addressed. For many participants, addressing their needs involves support workers advocating to and altering systems that produce unmet need and contribute to risks of tenancy sustainment.

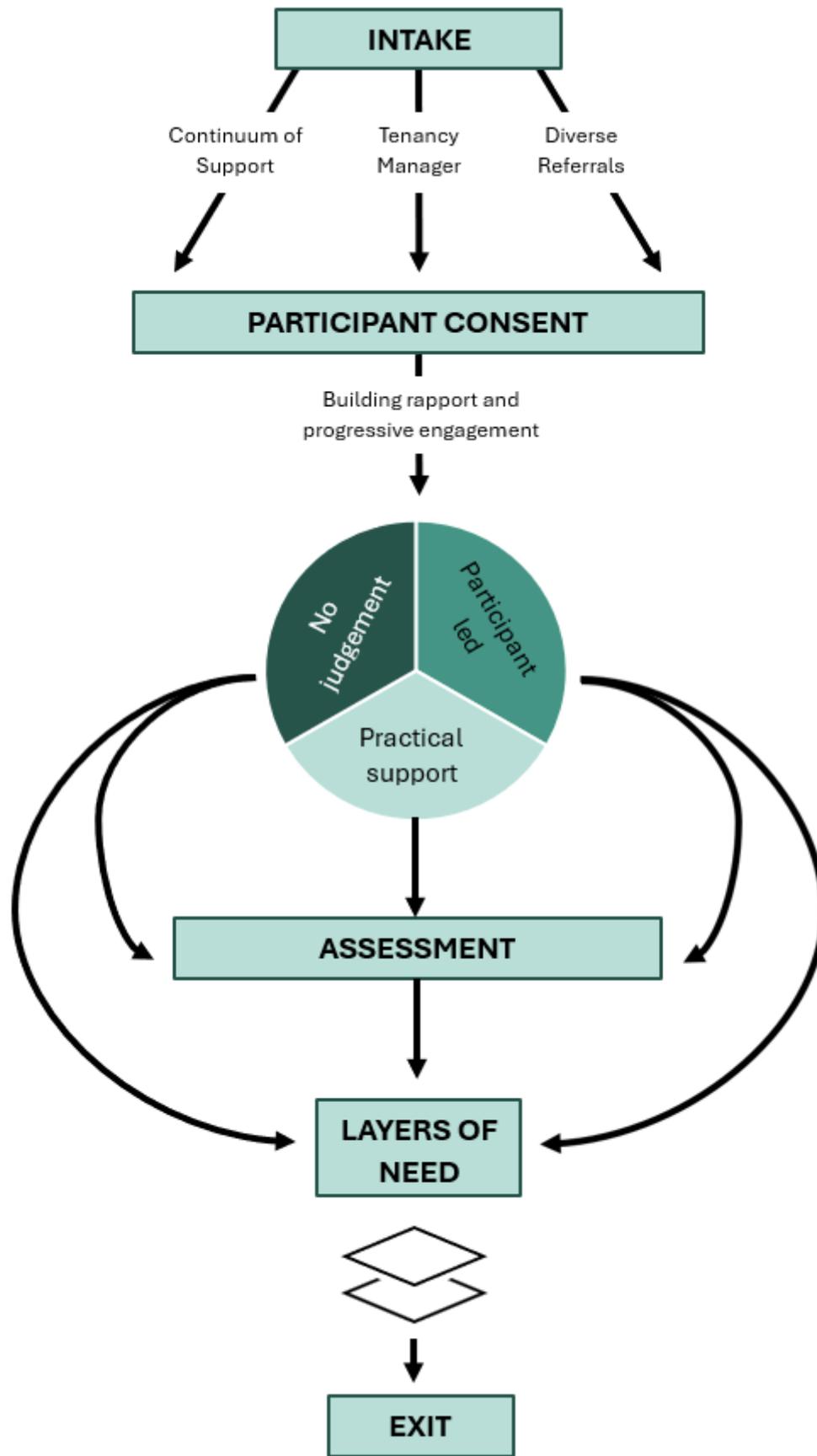
Taken together, the findings thus far presented in this chapter provide a critical overview of the sustaining tenancy practices that Micah workers engage in to support participants to sustain their tenancies and avoid exits into homelessness. Figure 2 below provides a visual representation of the support process that sustaining tenancy workers engage in.

What is the need to be addressed: presenting need or overarching need?

The problems that are posing a risk of entry into homelessness are, on the one hand, tenancy problems defined as things contrary to the expectations outlined in the residential tenancy agreement. These include rental arrears, neighbourhood disturbances, and property condition/damage. On the other hand, the problems extend well beyond, and underpin, the issues contrary to obligations set out in the residential tenancy agreement, such as domestic violence, addiction, and mental illness. The task of sustaining tenancies support workers, therefore, is to assist a person/family to sustain their tenancy by working to address the underlying causes. This points to (i) the skill set required among sustaining tenancies workers and (ii) the importance of broader health and human service systems to help address the problems threatening sustainability of tenancies.

The below provides an empirical example of layered problems that impact tenancies and the layers of work conducted to support a family to address a suite of issues that are culminating in risk of eviction. The family composition is a single mother with four school aged children: all of the children have complex needs. The mother has mental health issues and experiences of domestic violence. The family reside in private rental that is head-leased by a community housing provider. They were referred to the sustaining tenancies program because the property owner was dissatisfied with the cleaning of the property. The sustaining tenancies support worker commenced their engagement by helping the participant clean the property: "we used a little bit of brokerage to get some cleaning stuff."

Figure 2. Sustaining tenancies support process



In the first instance, help with access to cleaning products responded to the initial problem. The sustaining tenancies support worker went on to explain how their initial activities supporting the participant were directed toward passing the property inspections:

I would get pretty involved in helping her to prepare for inspections. And inspections seem to be a bit relentless. But the property condition was really like, there was an urgency around that, because they would have an inspection, and if that failed for some reason, they would then book another follow up inspection. It wasn't just another six months. She'd have another inspection in, like a few weeks. So it was kind of a bit of a constant thing, and then at the end of the day, she had to throw out some of her furniture. So linked her in with Vinnies to get some replacement stuff.

Preparing for inspections included not only assisting with cleaning products, but the support worker said that it also entailed helping the participant understand rental expectations and to manage the stress of constant property inspections. This stress was exacerbated by the threat of eviction, the loss of furniture, which the support provider assisted with by accessing alternative furniture from Vinnies, as well as the other issues experienced by the family.

The support worker described how the participant struggled to manage some of the complex health needs of her children, needs which were presenting as additional challenges with the school. Supporting the family to sustain the tenancy thus included help to address issues at the school:

The issues were a little bit more immediate with the school. So we would go down to the school a few times as well.

Engaging with the school responded to the mother's request for support. The support worker explained that the work they do prioritises what the family asks for and what is placing the tenancy at risk. The work engaging with the school enabled the sustaining tenancies worker to develop a more holistic idea of the various challenges that were impacting the tenancy. In addition to assisting the participant apply for social housing, the sustaining tenancies support worker was able to identify and refer to the expertise that the family required:

And then, as part of that we linked her in with an intensive family support. I did a referral to an intensive Family Support Service to come in and work with mum and the kids around some of those, well, they can work around children's behaviours or link them in with services and also work with around parent child interactions and relationships as well routines in the home, so they do more intensive work around family dynamics.

By focusing on sustaining a tenancy to prevent homelessness, the sustaining workers are engaged in assisting people with an almost endless array of tasks. The quantitative data demonstrated that providing participants with advice, such as about education, housing, finances, health, child safety, constituted 20 per cent of all activities that are provided to support participants. As illustrated above, some tasks, such as accessing cleaning supplies and support with cleaning, can be simple. Participants often spoke about the significant value they placed on assistance with transport: “[sustaining tenancies workers] take me doctor's appointment, so

make sure I get to me appointments and things like that. Like, sometimes my memory is not the best, so I skip things.”

These simple tasks meaningfully assist with the immediate and presenting problems that can impact people’s capacity to sustain their tenancies. Through supporting people with these tasks, the support workers develop rapport based on achieving outcomes. This rapport can lead to the identification of other, more significant, problems that are important to address as part of a wider approach to creating the conditions for sustainable housing.

The above example illustrates the importance of access to professionals to assist with family functioning. Working to support participants across multiple domains is predicated on the understanding, as a support worker articulated, that their task is directed towards:

Whatever the family feels like is going on. And would like us to kind of be in the middle of and advocate, because things snowball. And if there's a snowball coming, it's probably putting their housing at risk.

The experiences of participants resonated with these sentiments. To help people sustain their tenancies, the work across multiples layers relies upon persistence and continued engagement. The below participant acknowledges the practical support with transport to access medical care, but they reflected it was the persistence of their sustaining tenancies worker that enabled identification and ultimately treatment of the severe medical condition. The participant remarked that their sustaining tenancies worker has continued to provide:

Transport to and from doctors and harassing me to keep my health up. Well, I just found out about all the cancers... I wouldn't have found out if it wasn't for [sustaining tenancies support workers] picking me up to go to the doctors all the time. So I yeah, I just couldn't go, I just always let it go. Let it go. [Sustaining tenancies support worker] was insistent though.

By being participant-led, sustaining tenancies support workers require a deep knowledge of participants’ needs, which they use to liaise with and – as shown below – advocate for systems changes. The research also found that work that is participant-led must be sufficiently flexible to meet the changing needs of participants and their needs for support and housing change over time. A participant who had been supported by Micah’s homelessness and sustaining tenancies support programs for many years described the long-term support they had received that had evolved over time to meet his changing needs. The participant recalled:

When I really started connecting with them, it was 2018 at [suburb A], and that was with [community housing provider], and then that didn't work, so then Micah got involved, and then I went to [suburb B], and then that didn't work out, and Micah was supporting me at [suburb C]. So then I was moved on to [suburb D]. But in between these times, I was going in now to rehab. I was having an alcohol problem, so I was going into rehab. And then also Micah was helping me get a new tenancy, yeah, so then I went to after [suburb C], I came back here, then I got an apartment at [suburb D]. Micah was supporting me through that, and I was sober for nine months, amazing. And I was supported really well, and then that didn't work out, so I can't I drank again,

and then I came back here, and then Micah helped me get my best tenancy ever, and that's at [suburb E], and that's where I am now.

Affordability

The above data has illustrated the multiple layers of complexity and life challenges that underpin risks to tenancy. It is also significant to report that some people engage with sustaining tenancies programs whose risks to tenancy sustainment are driven by housing unaffordability. A support worker articulated this clearly:

I've got a couple of families that have been referred into us where the sole issue is just affordability. They cannot afford their rent. They're at risk of homelessness, so this is our team, this is us. But the only real concern is just affordability. They can't move to a different private rental, because it's the same issue again.

Rather than having multiple needs, some people receive support to assist with housing affordability problems that are placing their tenancies at risk. The quantitative data supports this. Housing affordability stress or financial difficulties were the main reasons for seeking assistance of sustaining tenancies support programs for more than a quarter of all participants (26.4 per cent).

Supporting participants whose risks to tenancy are a product of housing unaffordability takes two broad forms, depending on the nature of the affordability problems. First, the support can be directed toward assisting a participant access an alternative, affordable property. A leader of a sustaining tenancies program remarked that their focus was on avoiding homelessness, which meant, rather than sustaining a tenancy the participant is residing in, it is helping people to access and sustain whatever affordable housing enables the realisation of the high order objective of avoiding homelessness.

In practice, when someone is at risk of eviction because of affordability, the task of sustaining tenancies support workers entails helping participants:

Get rapidly, rapidly rehoused, rather than entering homelessness. And often that's rapid rehousing from an unaffordable private rental.

People in private rental can be at risk of eviction, not because of complex health problems such as addiction, but instead because rent increases can be unaffordable or family circumstances change, which in turn can impact affordability. The support workers can also assist participants to address affordability problems, particularly those driven by one-off crises, by helping them access funding sources. As one sustaining tenancies worker explained, helping address affordability problems placing a tenancy at risk is about accessing “subsidies they can temporarily have in place to support the family, or what other strategies can be used to sustain [housing] in the short-term.” The funding sources that sustaining tenancy workers support participants to access include rental subsidy schemes, bond loans, or even brokerage.

The second approach involved engaging with participants to support them to address other – non-housing – problems that are contributing to housing unaffordability. A support worker described this second approach as “moving upstream a little bit.” This involves, and with this assistance of the SPDAT, identifying any of the “things coming in causing the affordability issues.” This means

that sustaining tenancies support workers connect participants, not only to food parcels and provide transport to overcome financial barriers to accessing resources, but also community services and financial support counsellors who can assist people to address ongoing financial problems. A number of sustaining tenancies support workers highlighted the importance of domestic and family violence and legal support to help participants who experienced housing affordability, but whose affordability problems were actually the problem of being subject to financial abuse. These examples reinforce the centrality of working to understand, using Michael Marmot's language in the social determinants of health, the causes of the causes of tenancy problems.

Chapter summary

The findings presented in this chapter foreground the practices that sustaining tenancies workers engage in to support program participants to sustain their tenancies and avoid exits into homelessness. In particular, the findings demonstrate the critical importance of workers' ability to build rapport with participants by engaging in a way that is non-judgemental, participant-led, and provides practical support. For participants who engaged with sustaining tenancies programs as they exited homelessness, this rapport and trust is established as part of their continuum of support that commenced at assertive street outreach. Through this rapport, workers are able to better understand, assess, and support participants to address their multiple layers of both presenting and overarching need. This support process underpins a model of sustaining tenancies practice, which we explore in-depth in the following chapter.

Chapter 4: Towards a model of sustaining tenancies practice

Chapter overview

The previous chapter has presented a diverse set of data to illustrate both the multiple needs that underpin people's risk of losing housing and the layers of support provided to address risk and prevent entries into homelessness. This chapter draws on the data to develop a provisional model that conceptualises the practices of tenancy sustainment and homelessness prevention for people at risk of losing their housing.

A model of sustaining tenancies practice

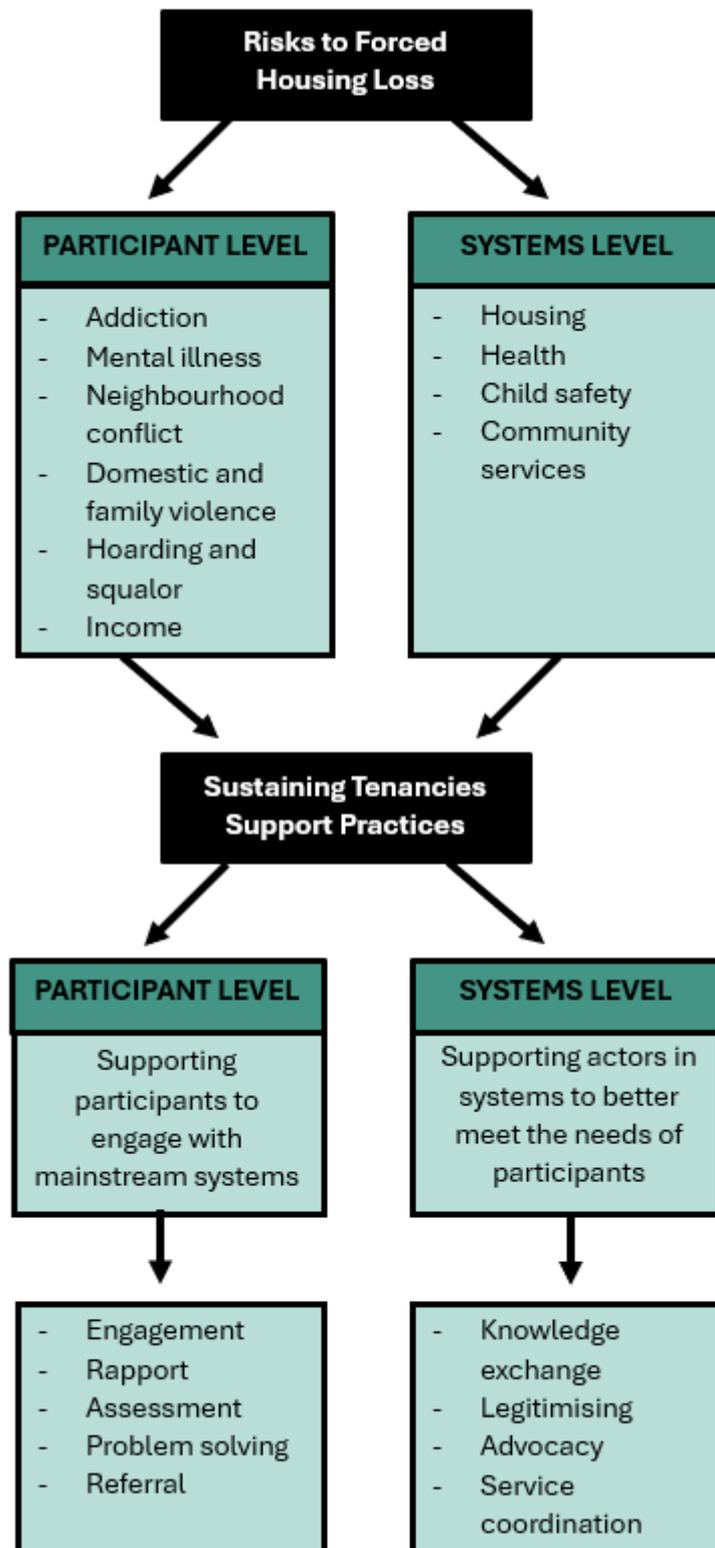
The model, which is visually represented in Figure 3 below, is predicated on a twofold problem construction of risks to forced housing loss. On the one hand, the problems are perceived by society to be with the participant. People experience problems – individual problems – that subvert their capacity to comply with tenancy obligations. These individual problems include addiction, mental illness, neighbourhood conflict, and domestic and family violence.

On the other hand, the problems that place tenancies at risk can be seen as systems problems. By systems we mean housing, as well as other domains of society such as health, child safety, and community services. Systems problems contribute to the risk to tenancies by creating barriers for people to access, comply with, and benefit from resources that are available in society.

Sustaining tenancies practices work to address problems experienced at *both* individual and systems levels. Or more specifically, the practices of sustaining tenancies involve (i) supporting participants to engage with mainstream systems, and (ii) supporting actors in mainstream systems to better meet the needs of participants. From this perspective, sustaining tenancy work constitutes a mediating role between participants and core institutions of society, including, but not limited to, housing. Work with individuals, as we have demonstrated in the previous chapter, entails a range of tasks – such as engagement, rapport building, assessment, problem solving, and referral – to support people excluded from and harmed by systems.

At the systems level, the practices to sustain tenancies constitute (i) knowledge exchange, (ii) legitimising, and (iii) advocacy. These three domains of practice are predicated on the understanding that systems prevent people from complying with their tenancy obligations. The problem lies within systems that do not meet the needs of participants. This includes the design of systems, the operation of systems, along with changes in systems.

Figure 3. Sustaining tenancies practice model



From close engagement with and assessment of participant needs, sustaining tenancies support workers direct their practices towards supporting systems to better meet the needs of participants so that their housing is sustainable. Work at the system level requires a deep knowledge of participants, as the practices to influence systems to better meet participant need

rely upon sustaining tenancies support workers to have detailed and comprehensive knowledge about the individual they are working on behalf of.

Knowledge exchange is a critical component of sustaining tenancies practices at the systems level. Some people experience risks to the sustainability of their tenancies because tenancy managers do not understand their experiences and needs. Following the voluntary consent underpinning engagement with sustaining tenancies programs, the practices of knowledge exchange include sustaining tenancies support workers providing the required information to tenancy managers so that they can alter their practices and approaches to respond to participants' needs. Rather than focusing on the participant need as the cause of tenancy risk, these practices of knowledge exchange work from the premise that the problem lies in insufficient or inadequate knowledge held by actors operating in housing and other systems. Knowledge exchange is a means to provide the information to key actors within systems so that they can work within existing systems in a way that meets participants' needs. A sustaining tenancies support worker described this practice of knowledge exchange as "training, educating housing providers about vulnerable families, or even educating about what the [sustaining tenancies] programs are and how it's actually a benefit to them."

This knowledge exchange is important as it helps tenancy managers develop a more complete and accurate understanding of what they could do differently to respond to participants experiencing problems. This enhanced knowledge can likewise give tenancy managers the confidence to continue working with participants as problems placing tenancies at risk are being resolved. As a sustaining tenancies worker observed, however, knowledge exchange is only about sharing what information is necessary to help the tenancy manager alter their approach:

Becoming a communicator between maybe a person and their real estate for a short period of time, even when they've basically lost hope for a while. Not necessarily telling them everything, but offering some sort of explanation and offering them, the housing providers, some hope that something's happening about it.

A participant explained this practice of knowledge exchange that highlights how sustaining tenancies support workers share information with housing providers that participants do not feel they can do themselves. The participant explained how:

I used to ring Housing. And then they've said, listen, ring Micah, because we can't handle these phone calls, because I'm, you know, anxious, embarrassed, humiliated, anxiety... Well, now my I ring Micah, and Micah talks to Housing for me, because I get too emotional. So Micah and [sustaining tenancies support worker] has just been amazing that way, like being able to communicate with Housing for me. What do you call? Middleman. And that just means the world to me. Yes, it's just amazing that they're able to communicate with Housing for me, being able to express to Housing how I feel in the right words.

The above participant describes how the practices of sustaining tenancies support is valued because it involves communicating with their tenancy manager in a way that both resonates with their preferences and the preferences of the tenancy manager. The information about the participant's needs and the work required to address them could neither be communicated by the participant nor received by the tenancy manager. The practices of knowledge exchange

assume that the problems with the tenancy will be addressed when the tenancy manager is more informed about the participant's situation and the support work that is occurring.

The second practice of sustaining tenancies at the systems level is *legitimising*. These practices illustrate how the position of sustaining tenancies support workers constitutes legitimacy that nudges the systems to become more responsive to people experiencing risks to their tenancies. Rather than only providing more information so that systems can be more responsive, these practices work from the premise that the work of professionals in an organisation have a standing that influences systems to meet the needs of participants. A sustaining tenancies worker described this practice of legitimising as:

The fact that we are from an organisation, and we're in the middle, you know, liaising and mediating and whatnot, means that our presence forces people to kind of toe the line a little bit. There have been times where working with one family who's in a private rental, and the real estate, they'll just be like, here's the new lease. Your rent's going up. They send it to me, and I go, no, no. New 12 month rule, you can't put the rent up. So we draft an email up, we send it off to the real estate and in two days, the response is, "oh, sorry, that's a mistake." It kind of forces a level of accountability for having an actual professional and organisational presence in the middle.

Participants were acutely conscious of the legitimising role that their sustaining tenancies support worker played and what this meant for accessing services. A parent referred to this legitimising role played by their sustaining tenancies worker as:

[Sustaining tenancies support worker] so yeah, he's a persistent worker. So I've got everything done, my kids' uniforms for school and all. Oh, look, welfare wouldn't help me or shit. Until [sustaining tenancies worker] right. As soon as [sustaining tenancies worker] rang, boom, so things happen.

Another parent likewise referred to the resources and support they received to sustain their tenancy when their worker became involved:

Because as soon as they [their sustaining tenancies support worker] say, oh, we're from Micah Project and we're here supporting the, you know, blah, blah, blah, they're like, ok, like, it's, yeah, it was like, ok, cool. They, Housing treats you a bit different. They help you a bit more, I think, when you are with Micah.

The third practice at the systems level is *advocating* for participants. Moving beyond knowledge exchange, or legitimising, the practices to sustain tenancies requires workers directly advocating to housing providers and other organisations such as child safety or Centrelink on behalf of their participants. The quantitative data indicates that advocacy is one of the primary forms of help to support people to sustain their tenancies. For example, advocacy constituted 25 per cent of the work, including 250 days of activity. When referring to their work, a sustaining tenancies worker stated:

Lots of advocacy with the housing providers. That's probably the biggest piece of work that happens with the housing providers, is the advocacy... Like advocating for payment plans.

Participants frequently understood that their sustaining tenancies support worker advocated on their behalf to their tenancy manager. Including some of the practices of both knowledge exchange and legitimising, the below participant believed that having their support worker advocate for them was important because they found it hard to contact their tenancy manager and they believed their tenancy manager did not understand their situation. The participant said:

[With] the Department of Housing it's like getting blood out of stone. You can't you've got a hold of them any so [sustaining tenancies support worker] just advocates for me, which is great. And it just takes that stress off me, having to make those half an hour phone calls and trying to explain myself to someone who's just, you know, nine times out of 10 is a pencil pushing [removed]. They don't understand trauma, they don't understand drug addiction, they don't understand recovery.

At the conceptual level, the above speaks to the point of what risks of tenancies are and what support to sustain them is: people are at risk when they do not comply with mainstream systems that assume life is progressing in an unproblematic manner. Support to sustain tenancies, thus, is about helping people survive in that mainstream system when their lives are not well placed to engage with and indeed benefit from those systems.

Chapter summary

In this chapter, we have outlined a provisional model that conceptualises Micah Projects' practices of tenancy sustainment. This model is predicated on an understanding that risks to tenancies occur at both the individual and systems level. Drawing on this understanding, the work to sustain tenancies means both supporting participants to engage with mainstream systems, and supporting actors in mainstream systems to better meet the needs of participants. Put this way, sustaining tenancies support work involves coordination between systems, especially tenancy managers and participants. It is to the needs of participants, and how the programs have been able to support these needs to enable tenancy sustainment, that we now turn.

Chapter 5: Meaning of sustaining tenancies

Chapter overview

Building on the previous two chapters' analysis of the practices of sustaining tenancies work, this chapter provides an empirical picture into the needs of participants and statistical analyses of the duration and intensity of support they receive. Conceptualising sustained housing and avoidance of homelessness as the overarching objectives of sustaining tenancies programs, the chapter also presents both qualitative and quantitative data on the meaning and outcomes of participants' housing.

Participant needs and strengths

In Chapter 3 we demonstrated that, to be eligible for sustaining tenancies programs, people needed to be at risk of losing their housing and entering homelessness. Developing a greater understanding of participants' needs and strengths, here we analyse data produced from the Service Prioritisation Decision Assistance Tool (SPDAT). The SPDAT data pertains to 296 individual participants and 58 family units. The small number of family units included in the data means that further statistical analysis on their engagement with the program is not statistically meaningful. Similarly, the limited data collected at second follow-up (n=34), third follow-up (n=9), and fourth follow-up (n=3) for individuals renders statistical analysis unreliable. Thus, we exclude family units and second, third, and fourth follow up from the below analysis. This means that our analysis is based on 410 observations (baseline n=296 + first follow-up n=114).

Table 1. SPDAT scores summary statistics (baseline and follow-up)

Summary statistic	Baseline	First follow up
Range (Min-Max)	3-58	1-44
Median	21	19.5
Mean	21.7	20.9
Observations	296	114

Table 1 shows the key information on SPDAT scores from baseline and follow-up observations. The range for SPDAT scores is 3 to 58 at baseline with a mean of 21.7 and a median of 21. At the first follow-up, SPDAT scores range from 1 to 44 with a mean of 20.9 and a median score of 19.5. The median is a useful measure to summarise the SPDAT scores since it is less affected by extreme values or outliers in the data. However, we found that the difference in median SPDAT scores between baseline and first follow-up is not statistically significant when we used a Wilcoxon signed-rank test. We therefore infer that the median difference between the paired observations at baseline and follow-up is not significantly different from zero.

From the baseline data, we conducted analysis to identify participants whose SPDAT score was low acuity or high acuity. The SPDAT manual advises that a score equal to or greater than 20 constitutes high acuity, whereas a score below 20 constitutes low acuity. We identify the

proportion of the sample whose score places them in either low or high, and we analysed the data to determine whether participants' acuity changed between baseline and first follow-up. Table 2 below presents this data. The results show a small decrease in the percentage of participants with high acuity over time.

Table 2. Acuity score at baseline and follow-up

SPDAT score	Baseline	First follow up
Low score	45.1%	50.0%
High score	54.9%	50.0
Observations	296	114

The data also enables us to identify in more granular detail how the low or high acuity scores sit across some core demographic characteristics. We present this in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Demographic characteristics of participants by SPDAT score

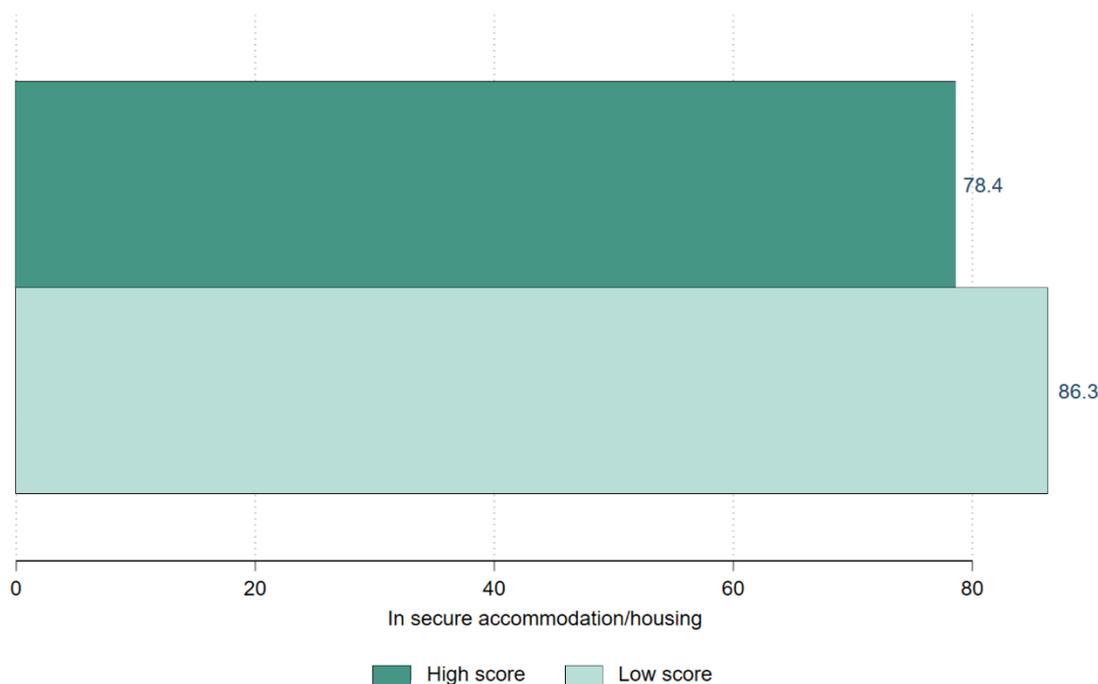
Demographic information	Low score	High score	Participants
Gender (%)			
Female	52.2	47.8	90
Male	41.5	58.5	205
Indigeneity (%)			
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	52.0	48.0	77
Neither	41.8	58.2	177
Don't know	45.2	54.8	42
CALD (%)			
No	42.4	57.6	257
Yes	63.6	36.4	33
Total observations	133	163	

The data reported in the above table outlines some important observations. We observe low and high acuity groups among certain demographics. For example, more females report low acuity, whereas a higher percentage of males report high acuity. Further, a higher percentage of people who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander score low acuity, compared with people who identify as neither Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander or don't know; a greater proportion of the latter two report high acuity, 58.2 per cent and 52.8 per cent respectively. People who identify as CALD (culturally and linguistically diverse) score low acuity (63.6 per cent) compared with people who do not identify as CALD, who report high acuity (57.6 per cent).

Housing

Here we present data on the housing status of participants at the end of their support with a sustaining tenancies program. Recall that we draw on data from 296 individual participants. At the end of their support period, 206 participants were in secure accommodation/housing and 45 participants were not in secure accommodation/housing (45 participants were currently supported and thus had no end support period status). If we compare the outcome of 'secure accommodation/housing' at the end of support period among participants with a high acuity score, we can see subtle differences. This data is presented in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4. Secure accommodation/housing for low and high acuity participants



For participants with high acuity, 78.4 per cent ended the support period in secure accommodation/housing compared with 86.3 per cent of participants who reported low acuity and were in secure accommodation at the end of the support period. Even though participants with high acuity are less likely to be in secure accommodation at the end of support compared to participants with low acuity, when we conducted a chi-square test, we found that the difference is not statistically significant at the 5 per cent level. The test reveals no statistically significant association between participants' acuity and being in secure accommodation/housing at the end of the support period.

The modest and non-statistically significant differences between housing outcome among low and high acuity participants can be understood in the context of the design of the sustaining tenancies support programs. As demonstrated in the previous two chapters, sustaining tenancies support workers endeavour to support participants for as long as required to assist with stabilising their tenancies. The qualitative data from the previous two chapters illustrates that sustaining tenancies support workers and participants routinely collaborate together for as long as required to address the issues that led to the referral into the programs. We now turn to examine the quantitative data that helps triangulate this knowledge about the program design working with participants for the length and intensity required.

Duration and intensity of support

Here we analyse the quantitative data to understand both the duration and intensity of support provided to participants of sustaining tenancies support programs. Given the data above demonstrating similar housing outcomes at close of support among participants with low and high acuity scores, our analysis of the data is particularly honed to the duration and intensity of support among participants with low and high acuity. We explore whether similar housing outcomes are attributed to a greater duration and intensity of support to people with high acuity compared to people with low acuity.

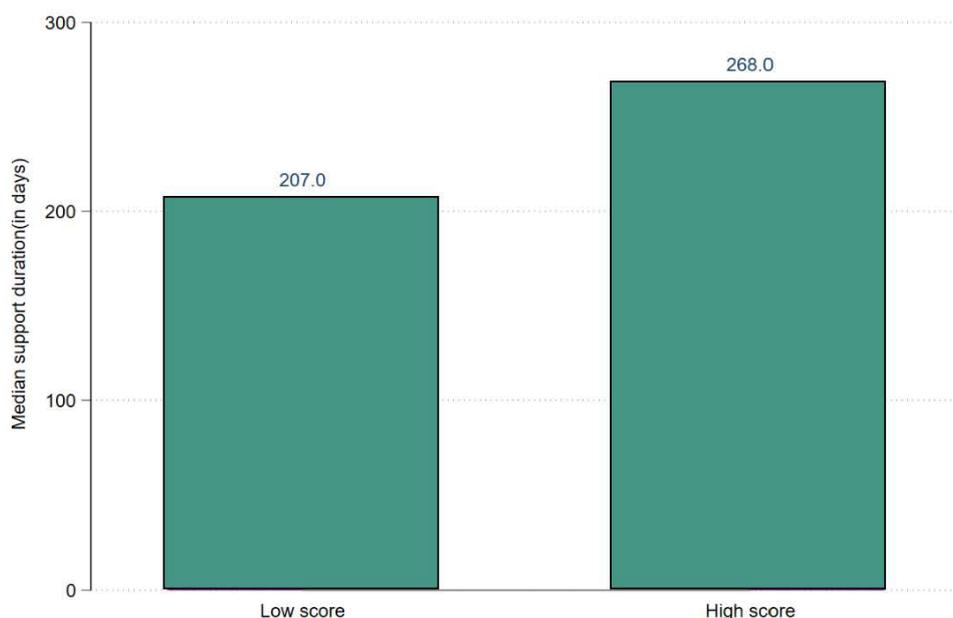
Of the 296 individual participants, the median support period is 231.5 days. Very importantly, the duration of support provided varied by low and high acuity. Table 4 and Figure 5 below presents this data.

Table 4. Support period summary statistics by acuity score

Summary statistics for support period	Low score	High score
Range	15-1160 days	17-1268 days
Median	207 days (6.8 months)	268 days (8.8 months)
Mean	266 days (8.7 months)	316 days (10.3 months)
Observations	117	134

Table 4 shows that the summary statistics for support period duration (in days) differ by the participants' acuity score. Participants with low acuity score report lower median support duration of 207 days compared with those with high acuity.

Figure 5. Median support duration (in days) by acuity score



The above presentation of the summary statistics for support period aligns with expectations (Figure 5). Participants with high acuity receive a greater duration of support from sustaining tenancies support workers than participants with low acuity. To achieve comparable housing outcomes at close of support, the period of support for participants with high acuity is longer than the period of support for participants with low acuity.

We then asked what intensity of support is provided to participants. The data enables intensity of support to be measured in terms of the hours sustaining tenancies support workers spend with participants. Of the 296 participants, the average (median) intensity of support is approximately 45 hours.

The average of support intensity conceals significant variation among low and high acuity participants. In Table 5 below, we present intensity of support data by low acuity compared to high acuity participants.

Table 5. Total effort time by acuity score

Total effort time per participant	Low score	High score
<5 hours	7.5	1.2
5-19 hours	32.1	15.3
20-49 hours	22.4	27.6
>=50 hours	38.1	55.8
Observations	133	163

As Table 5 clearly demonstrates, there is a high intensity of support provided to assist participants with high acuity to sustain their tenancies. Whereas 38.1 per cent of low acuity participants received 50 or more hours of support, 55.8 per cent of high acuity participants received 50 or more hours of support. Our tests show a high chi-square test statistic that is statistically significant at the 5 per cent level and reveals a significant association between intensity of support and acuity. It suggests that people with higher acuity require significantly more intensive support as measured by time spent with participant on organising and providing support services and activities.

The data indicates that the comparable housing outcomes achieved among high and low acuity participants can be attributed to both the greater duration and intensity of support provided. This is part of the program design and fits in with the qualitative data presented in earlier chapters.

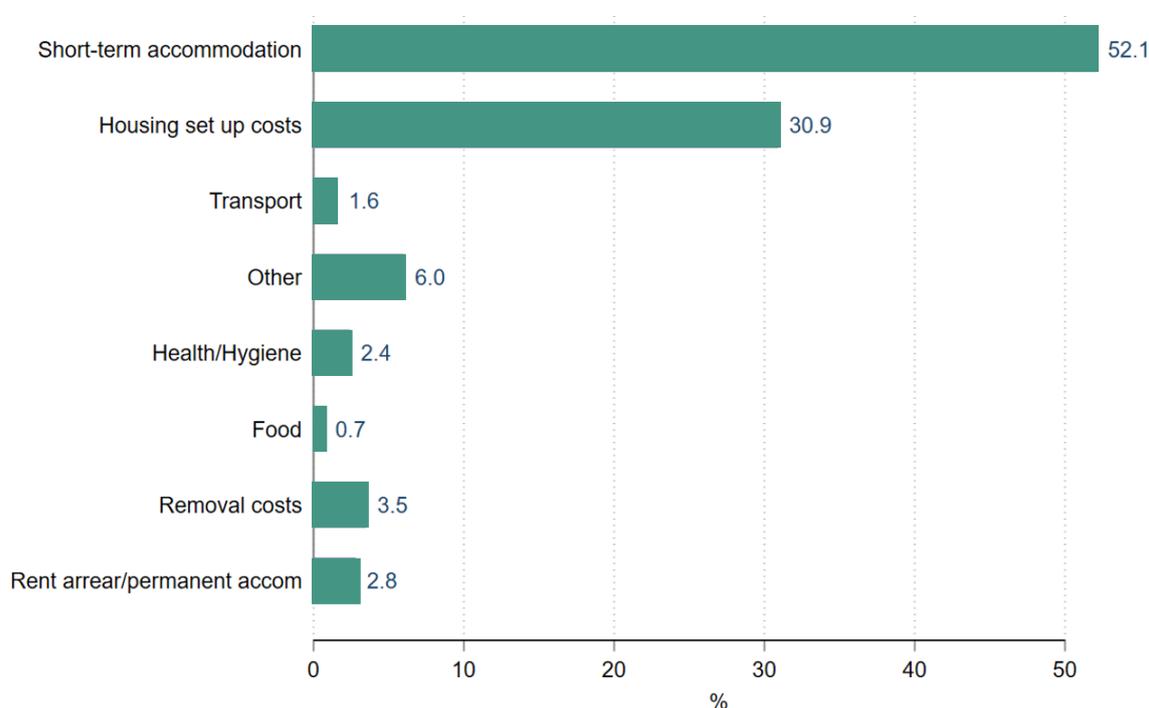
This, however, is only part of what constitutes successful support to enable participants to sustain their housing and avoid homelessness. Building on the qualitative analysis presented in Chapters 3 and 4 that highlighted the value participants placed on receiving tangible support to address practical and immediate problems, it is important to scrutinise the data on duration and intensity of support further to uncover a core domain of support. As we now demonstrate, brokerage is a fundamental resource that supports people at risk of eviction retain their housing.

Brokerage

For our study period between 01 January 2021 and 10 May 2024, participants received approximately \$1,326,283 in brokerage from sustaining tenancies support programs. This covers 4,164 instances of where brokerage supported 578 individuals and family participants¹. Indeed, the data shows that brokerage is evenly distributed to participants who are individuals (51.7 per cent) and participants in family units (48.3 per cent).

Figure 6 below tells us how the brokerage funding was used to support participants. Specifically, it shows the percentage of brokerage funding spent on supporting participants with housing set up costs, transport, crisis accommodation, food, health and hygiene, removal costs, rent arrears, and other forms of support.

Figure 6. Brokerage funding by purpose



Short-term accommodation constitutes the majority of the brokerage funding (52.1 per cent), followed by housing set up costs (30.9 per cent) that include payments for white goods, mattresses, furniture, electronics, etc. The limited peer reviewed academic literature that exists illustrates that practical support to set up housing is a critical determiner in creating the conditions for sustained tenancies (Pawson & Munro 2010).

The quantitative data conveys the extensiveness of brokerage provided, and the qualitative data with participants illuminates what brokerage means. Participants understand that brokerage, particularly to set up their housing, is not only valued, but central to feeling valued by their sustaining tenancies support workers and to begin the process of making a home.

¹ In 399 instances, the brokerage amount was \$0. About 82 per cent of these zero-amount transactions are related to participants' transport needs and their use of taxi vouchers. A further 8 per cent of zero-amount transactions are related to supporting health/hygiene of the participants by funding their transportation to and from hospitals, dental clinics, medical centres, etc.

A parent who was supported by a sustaining tenancies support worker as they transitioned from homelessness to housing described what brokerage looked like and meant:

So, like, we kind of, we came in and we're standing in here, like, when nothing was in here, and [sustaining tenancies support worker], she was our worker at the time. She's like, okay, so you know, what is it you needed, kind of thing... I was like a washing machine, and we were just assuming that it was going to come second hand. We'd never, I'd never gotten anything new. And, um, all of a sudden, like, about four days later, we had a delivery truck show up, and they were just wheeling this table as well, yeah, and, and the lounge chair like they were just wheeling in all their stuff. TV. Like, just phenomenal.

Another participant described likewise. When asked if they were supported at the point of commencing their tenancy, the participant explained:

Interviewer: Did [sustaining tenancies support worker] help you get any other stuff?

Participant: Everything you see. Look. This table. Yeah, the TV, a refrigerator, a washing machine, microwave, all brand new. Cutlery. Virtually everything.

It is easy to see how participants place great value on brokerage that enabled the funding of practical supports to set up their tenancies. Entering an empty home with insufficient income or support undermines the home making process and threatens housing sustainability (Chamberlain & Johnson 2018). Although participants did value the practical resources that brokerage enabled, especially receiving brand new appliances and furnishings for the first time, they understood that it represented something more profound in their lives.

We conclude this chapter with the sentiments of a participant who developed and added profound meaning to what practical support to sustain their tenancies – including to set up their homes – meant. Their reflections help tie together the research findings presented in this report. Help to sustain a tenancy and to prevent homelessness requires skilful practice that is participant-led, that solves practical problems, and that operates at both individual and systems levels. This collaborative work between participant and sustaining tenancies support worker does more than ‘sustain a vulnerable tenancy’ or ‘prevent an entry (very often re-entry) into homelessness.’ People understand that the support they receive is part of a broader endeavour in creating the conditions to live with dignity and autonomy. Support to sustain housing is support to enable people to live with meaning:

Look. I'd be under that mate's front steps over there, in the park, if [sustaining tenancies support worker] didn't help me out. And my kids would have been, two of my kids definitely would have been fucking dead. [name removed] would have killed herself 100% by now. And she's now got her own housing commission. She's got a baby. And the youngest one, the 16 year old, she was stealing cars fucking down the Gold Coast, sniffing Rexona and everything... She hasn't missed a day of school and over a year now coz [sustaining tenancies support worker] has been behind me.

Chapter summary

The findings presented in this chapter demonstrate similar housing outcomes between participants with low acuity and those with high acuity. To achieve these comparable housing outcomes, and aligning with the program design, the period of support for participants with high acuity is longer than the period of support for participants with low acuity, and the support provided is more intensive. Critical to the provision of such support is the availability of brokerage funds and the flexibility to deploy these funds in a way that is meaningful and useful to the participant. The similar housing outcomes among low and high acuity participants also speak to the ongoing and collaborative work undertaken by sustaining tenancies support workers and participants to address the issues that led to the referral into the programs.

Chapter 6: Ten core elements of sustaining tenancies support work

Element 1: Proactive work. Engagement requires proactive work. The proactive work includes (i) outreach to locate and connect with tenants, (ii) rapidly responding to referrals, (iii) actively offering and making available support to tenants, and (iv) using interactions between support workers and tenants as a tool of education about supports, resources, obligations, and behaviours that impact on tenancy. Efforts to engage tenants need to be informed by an understanding that disability, acquired brain injury, and trauma can impact decision-making, behaviours, and capacity to do tasks to comply with tenancy obligations. For some tenants, ongoing support will be required over the long-term to ensure they can maintain housing.

Element 2: Rapport building. Rapport building between support worker and tenants is central to both initial engagement and long-term successful outcomes. Rapport is established through (i) a non-judgemental and respectful approach, (ii) tenant-led practice, and (iii) having the resources to provide practical supports to address immediate problems whilst staying focused on the long-term goal of sustaining a tenancy. Team based work enables strong rapport in providing tenants with choices over who they work with.

Element 3: Evidence-informed tools. The use of evidence-informed tools is critical. For example, the Critical Time Intervention (CTI) can inform practice at critical life transitions. The Service Prioritisation Decision Assistance Tool (SPDAT) constitutes an important resource to underpin sustaining tenancies case management. The use of evidence-informed tools, in collaboration with multi-disciplinary and multi-agency stakeholders, needs to be adapted to best suit and respond to specific cohorts. Evidence-informed tools used in collaboration with external partners can provide the scaffolding that a person may need to be able to have a lease, meet their obligations, and achieve stability in their housing.

Element 4: Continuum of support. Sustaining tenancies support work operates on the level of a continuum of support within an eco-system that is explicitly and deliberately connected to assertive street outreach. The continuum of support means that sustaining tenancies work engages with people as they make the significant life transition from being homeless to being housed and making home. As a continuum of support, sustaining tenancies practices are effective when they are designed to purposefully fit within an eco-system that not only includes housing, but also assertive street outreach. For individuals and families who have experienced chronic, persistent, and often inter-generational homelessness, the integration of assertive street outreach with linked sustaining tenancies teams within the one agency provides an effective mode of operating a continuum of support.

Element 5: Tailored solutions. Clarity in purpose and tailored solutions for populations groups is a critical success factor to achieve housing stability. Sustaining tenancy teams are characterised by being mobile (outreach) and may tailor their support to the diverse needs of people across a life-course. Typically, teams work with people for determined a period with various levels of intensity according to individual/family needs, and with a range of practices in expectations of ratio of participant to worker. Further, the specific needs of cohorts, such as individuals or families, must be responded to through practices that reflect their experiences and

situations. Work with families not only involves key agencies such as education and statutory child protection, but sustaining tenancies with families also requires work across family dynamics. This involves acknowledging parental care giving to children.

Element 6: Addressing multiple and interacting problems. Skilful practice enables the identification of and support to address the multiple and interacting problems that pose risk to housing loss and entry into homelessness. Sustaining tenancies support work frequently involves both supporting tenants to address immediate problems placing tenancies at risk as well as support to address the problems that underly the presenting tenancy issues. The underpinning problems that contribute to risk of entering homelessness are also detrimental to quality of life. Sustaining tenancies support work to address these risks is likewise support that directly contributes to tenants' improved quality of life. Contributing to improved quality of life at the same time contributes to sustained housing.

Element 7: Engaging with systems. Excellence in sustaining tenancies support work is directed at both the individual/families at risk of losing housing and the housing and other systems where risk of housing loss is located. Sustaining tenancies support work involves an advocacy and mediating role to ensure that systems and external services are responsive to tenants, and direct work with tenants to support them to engage, be compliant with, and benefit from external services and resources, including housing.

Element 8: Service coordination. Service coordination is key to sustaining tenancies support work. Service coordination is especially important when services are critical to tenants' stable health and wellbeing or when tenants are required to demonstrate compliance to external systems. These systems vary for individuals and families – with child protection being a dominant presence or perceived threat to many family households alongside mental health, corrections, police, and domestic and family violence. Service coordination involves educating and sharing resources with external services that can continue to support tenants at the end of sustaining tenancies support work.

Element 9: Addressing risks to tenancies. Preventing homelessness takes precedence. Sustaining tenancies support workers must understand tenant obligations set out in legislation, on the one hand, and support tenants to comply with tenancy obligations, on the other hand. This provides the foundation to work in partnership with a tenant and tenancy managers to problem solve solutions and take actions to redress risks to tenancy loss. This is a core element of sustaining tenancies work and is most effective when there are strong relationships between the tenant, tenancy manager, and sustaining tenancies support worker. A shared sustaining tenancy plan provides the expectations of each agency and the tenant in resolving issues.

Element 10: Preventing homelessness. If tenancy loss is inevitable then the fundamental principle of preventing homelessness is enacted to drive a responsive and adaptive approach. The more than 50 per cent of brokerage spend on short-term accommodation identified in this research was directed toward ensuring people could access accommodation, for example, at the end of a lease or when forced out of housing under other conditions, such as violence. Similarly, preventing homelessness meant that sustaining tenancies practices involved support to identify and access alternative housing and subsidies. For some individuals/families, sustaining tenancies support work will be insufficient to sustainably prevent entries (including re-entries) into homelessness; in these situations, permanent supportive housing is demonstrated as the effective response to create sustainable housing and homelessness prevention.

Appendix 1: Organisational considerations for implementing sustaining tenancies support programs

1. A philosophical commitment to all people's right to housing, along with a belief that sustaining a person's tenancy is achievable with the right resources, skills, and practices.
2. The development of robust risk and safety protocols. Risk and safety protocols are critical to enable a safe work environment that enables staff to deliver on the core elements of sustaining tenancies support work, including outreach, tenant-led practice, and adaptability and creativity. Risk and safety protocols provide the structured framework for innovative practice to realise the philosophical principles.
3. Outreach policy. For sustaining tenancies support teams to successfully work with people most likely to lose housing and less likely to access housing, outreach is a core ingredient to both engagement and service delivery. Outreach requires:
 - a. Vehicles allocated to appropriate staff ration
 - b. Mobile phones, laptops
4. Team based case management creates the optimal conditions for:
 - a. Distribution of demand through daily allocation and adaption of workloads
 - b. Tenants to have needs met when required rather than when worker is rostered on shift
 - c. Sharing of expertise and sharing of challenges
 - d. Collective decision making
 - e. Sharing of external networks and resources
 - f. Reflective group supervision. Group supervision is not only significant for collective support and problem solving, but also to reflect upon new learnings and evidence to contribute to team-based continuous learning
5. Commitment to service coordination promotes opportunities to progress:
 - a. Multidisciplinary teams
 - b. Integrating funding sources
 - c. Inter-agency collaboration, including through, for instance, co-location
 - d. Joined, planned, and systematic work with tenants
 - e. Revolutionising how data is collected, shared, linked, analysed, and significantly, used as a means to drive excellence in tenant outcomes

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