

**Submission
No 40**

OPTIONS FOR ESSENTIAL WORKER HOUSING IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Australian College of Midwives ACM

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Australian College of
Midwives

ACM: For midwives. With women. For the future.

Select Committee on Essential Worker Housing

ACM Submission

Issued September 2024

Select Committee on Essential Worker Housing

The Australian College of Midwives

The Australian College of Midwives (ACM) is the peak professional body for midwives in Australia; and welcomes the opportunity to provide a written submission to the *Select Committee on Essential Worker Housing*. ACM represents the professional interests of midwives, supports the midwifery profession to enable midwives to work to full scope of practice (SoP), and is focused on ensuring better health outcomes for women, babies, and their families.

Midwives are primary maternity care providers working directly with women and families, in public and private health care settings across all geographical regions. There are 34,318 midwives in Australia and 1,257 endorsed midwives¹. ACM is committed to leadership and growth of the midwifery profession, through strengthening midwifery leadership and enhancing professional opportunities for midwives.

Terms of Reference

This submission will address point 1a: ‘Establishing an appropriate definition for essential worker housing for the NSW Government to adopt including criteria for prioritising worker cohorts and geographical areas’.

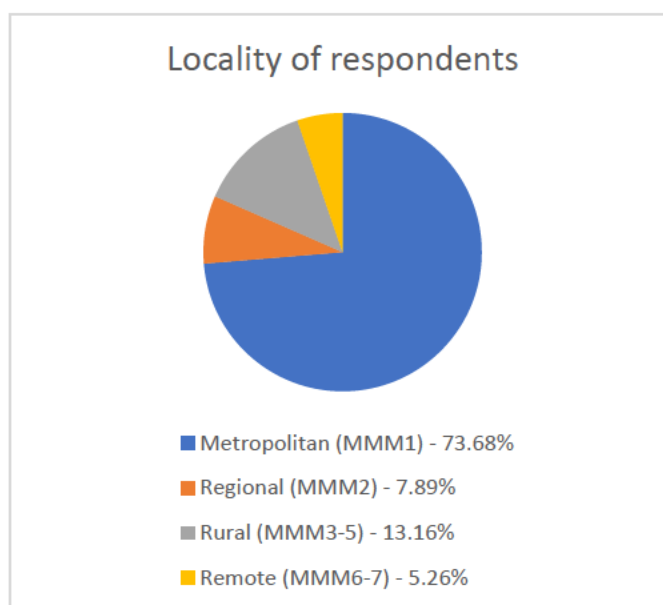
Background

The midwifery workforce in NSW is under pressure, with staffing challenges across the state, and shortages more acute in rural and remote areas. NSW midwives are less well paid than midwives in other jurisdictions in Australia, making affordable housing an important factor in recruitment and retention of the midwifery workforce. For further information, see ACM’s submission below:

[NSW The implementation of Portfolio Committee No. 2 recommendations](#)

ACM survey

ACM conducted a survey of midwives and midwifery students to support this submission. We received 38 responses. 75.3% of respondents are midwives, with the remaining 23.7% midwifery students. Locality of respondents is shown in the pie chart. No respondents identify as First Nations Australian. Survey results will be outlined in the submission.



The priority opportunities for ACM include:

1. Ensure midwives are included in any definition of essential worker housing, and considered in essential worker housing priorities.
2. Specifically include midwives in all current and future affordable housing schemes for essential workers.
3. Consider rural and remote housing as an important factor in midwifery workforce recruitment and retention.
4. Provide safe and affordable permanent and short-term housing options close to hospitals.
5. Ensure suitability of essential worker accommodation for midwives (eg. for on-call and shift work).
6. Include consideration of travel distance, safe and affordable transport and parking.
7. Include consideration of family-friendly and pet-friendly housing and neighbourhoods.
8. Provide safe and free or subsidised accommodation for midwifery students attending clinical placement (if not located near their place of residence).

Establishing an appropriate definition for essential worker housing for the NSW Government to adopt including criteria for prioritising worker cohorts and geographical areas

Availability of housing

'I feel as though I cannot afford to move or live anywhere else so needed to find work as close to home as possible.' Rural midwife.

Housing availability can impact on choice of work location, and therefore on recruitment and retention of an adequate midwifery workforce. When asked whether housing availability has ever been a factor in choice of work location, 60.5% of survey respondents answered 'yes', and 13.2% answered 'partly'. This demonstrates that a lack of suitable accommodation has a significant potential to impact on the recruitment of midwifery workforce. Further analysis of this question by location was undertaken, including only midwives (not students):

	Yes	Partly	No
Metropolitan	50%	20%	30%
Regional / Rural / Remote	77.8%	11.1%	11.1%

Acknowledging that the number of respondents is small for the purposes of statistical analysis, there nevertheless appears to be a clear trend apparent, with 88.9% of regional, rural and remote respondents finding that housing availability is a factor in their decision of where to work, versus 70% of metropolitan respondents. In addition, ACM regularly receives ongoing feedback from members in all states and territories which supports this trend. Lack of workforce has been a factor cited in the closure of rural and remote birthing services², so housing availability in these locations can significantly impact on maternity care options for local women.

'We can't afford to stay in NSW. With the increase in interest rates, we have had to sell our home. We will be moving to QLD.' Metropolitan midwife.

In answer to the question: 'If you relocated in the last five years, how difficult was it to find suitable accommodation within your budget?', 53.6% answered 'very difficult', 25% answered 'difficult', and 21.4% answered 'neither easy nor difficult'. No respondents answered 'easy' or 'very easy'. The [Shared Equity Home Buyer Helper](#) scheme was a positive step towards affordable housing for essential workers, however the pilot is now closed. The house price limits may also have been unrealistic for the current housing market, and the income limits impractical to service a mortgage in the current cost of living crisis. Rentals are also under immense pressure across Australia, as demonstrated by the [inquiry into the worsening rental crisis in Australia](#). It is noted that the recent [announcement](#) of subsidised rentals for essential workers in NSW does not mention midwives. While it is presumed that midwives are intended to be included in this scheme, ACM advocates for specific inclusion of midwives at all stages of planning and delivery of this and any future affordable housing schemes for essential workers.

'I have done numerous agency contracts where the accommodation was substandard. I was even told at one location that I couldn't have a particular unit as it was too good for nurses. I also experienced a home invasion in the middle of the night at one location in 2019.' Rural midwife.

Short-term housing close to hospitals was previously offered for staff in the process of relocation. Subsidised, secure housing for staff who do agency / temporary work, and for staff in the process of relocation, would be supportive of the workforce, especially in areas where permanent housing is scarce.

'As an agency and travelling midwife the availability of accommodation that is private, clean, secure and in close proximity to the hospital is an important factor in where I choose to work. A lot of the accommodation offered meets none of these needs.' Rural midwife.

Recommendations:

- Ensure midwives are included in any definition of essential worker housing, and considered in essential worker housing priorities.
- Specifically include midwives in all current and future affordable housing schemes for essential workers.
- Consider rural and remote housing as an important factor in midwifery workforce recruitment and retention.
- Provide safe and affordable permanent and short-term housing options close to hospitals.

Midwifery-specific housing considerations

The current cost of housing is pushing essential workers further away from central suburbs, increasing commute times and availability of essential workers³. In addition to the usual factors that influence appropriateness of accommodation for all essential workers, there are some considerations that may disproportionately need consideration for midwives.

- The vast majority of midwives are women, with many of childbearing / child-rearing age⁴, so family-friendly homes, neighbourhoods, and facilities such as schools and childcare are important.
- Many midwives spend some of their working life on-call. This includes midwives practicing in Midwifery Continuity of Care models, and also midwives who predominantly work in a shift work model but need to be on-call at times (especially in rural and remote areas). In addition, midwives in all models of care frequently work unsociable hours. Safe commute to the hospital is therefore essential, including travel distance and parking.

- Shift work and on-call work do not lend themselves to the use of public transport, even in places where this is available and reliable. Safe roads and affordable parking are therefore factors to consider. For instance, in some rural and remote locations, distance to the health service may not be far in terms of kilometres, but irregularly maintained roads and other factors such as flooding can impact on accessibility.

‘It is difficult not being able to afford living closer to the hospital. The additional time taken to travel and park substantially increases the length of my working day, increasing fatigue. It is also a strain financially. It has contributed to me turning down opportunities as it is not feasible due to being able to not have affordable housing.’ Metropolitan midwife.

Recommendations:

- Ensure suitability of essential worker accommodation for midwives (eg. for on-call and shift work).
- Include consideration of travel distance, safe and affordable transport and parking.
- Include consideration of family-friendly and pet-friendly housing and neighbourhoods.

Midwifery students

As the future of the midwifery workforce, supporting midwifery students is an important priority. Midwifery students face significant financial hardship, and this is a driving factor in attrition and reduced diversity of midwifery graduates⁵. The financial impact of attending compulsory clinical placements and being on-call for birthing women contribute to placement poverty and attrition⁵.

‘Rental housing crisis has made finding work around my home inconsistent. As I have been moving every year. My rent went from \$375 to \$630 across 4 homes in 4 years.’ Metropolitan midwifery student.

As well as long-term accommodation for work and study, midwifery students require access to safe, affordable short-term accommodation for clinical placements. In answer to the question ‘If you are a midwifery student or new graduate, has accommodation availability ever been a factor in your choice of clinical placement location?’, out of nine midwifery students who responded to the survey, seven students (77.8%) stated that availability of accommodation was a factor in their choice of clinical placement location.

Positive clinical placement experience in a rural location increases the likelihood of a future rural work location⁶, so facilitating clinical placements outside of metropolitan areas would impact positively on future workforce in understaffed regional, rural and remote locations. Free or subsidised accommodation close to clinical placement health services across NSW would relieve financial pressure on midwifery students.

‘At [University] we do not get to choose our clinical placement location, it is allocated to us so we are expected to travel up to 90 minutes (one-way) to work. Any housing close to the university swallows up about 50% of the average student and full-time workers joint income. It is impossible to afford to live out of home and close to the university without significant help from family and/or spouses. Many choose to live with family and/or travel long distances for class and placement. The projected \$300/wk placement payment will only deliver a \$7/hr pay-rate and only apply during placement weeks. Many midwifery students are also ineligible for Youth Allowance or AUSTUDY due to having completed undergraduate degrees in other fields previously. Support for essential workers/students to secure

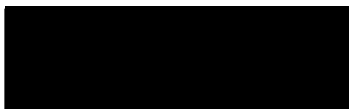
affordable housing (appropriate for people with families and pets) would make the workforce much more sustainable.’ Metropolitan midwifery student.

Recommendations:

- Provide safe and free or subsidised accommodation for midwifery students attending clinical placement (if not located near their place of residence).

Conclusion

The ACM welcomes this consultation, and the focus on essential worker housing. ACM notes that any definition for essential worker housing in NSW must include midwifery within the context of the definition of an essential worker, and must consider the specific needs of midwives. Housing for rural and remote midwives should be prioritised as a workforce retention strategy, and temporary and permanent student accommodation must be included. Some specific considerations for midwives and midwifery students have been presented.



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Consent to publish

ACM consents to this submission being published in its entirety, including names.

Consent to provide further information

ACM is available to provide further expert opinion and advice if required.

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