

**Submission  
No 94**

## **OPTIONS FOR ESSENTIAL WORKER HOUSING IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

**Organisation:** Health Services Union (HSU)

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# Housing Policy Pushing NSW Health Sector Workers to the Edge

Essential Worker Housing Inquiry Submission  
October 2024

# About This Report

Behind the statistics and policy discussions are real people—health workers who dedicate their lives to caring for others but are themselves struggling to survive. These are the voices of those caught in the grip of a housing crisis that has left them vulnerable, desperate, and, in some cases, homeless. This is not just about affordability; it's about the emotional and physical toll of a system that fails to provide the most basic human right: a safe and stable home. The stories presented in this report lay bare the stark reality of a society that is leaving its essential workers behind.

In September 2024, HSU surveyed a selection of its members across New South Wales to inform its submission to the NSW Parliament Essential Worker Housing Inquiry. Among the 930 respondents, the majority were evenly distributed across the 25- 65 age range, with 70% identifying as female and 66% working full-time. Participants represented a variety of roles within public and private health, aged care, disability services and ambulance sectors from rural, regional, and metropolitan locations.

The data captured in this report reveals the alarming impact on the well-being of health workers when they struggle to access adequate housing. It is apparent that this issue requires immediate attention from policymakers and politicians to support those who are tasked with caring for the most vulnerable in our society. This issue cannot be solved by private equity or industry superannuation funds. For too long, we have subsidised the wrong sectors, leading to unproductive gains and rising costs. It is time for the government to take responsibility for the communities it governs.

## The Health Services Union

The Health Services Union (HSU) comprises over 51,000 essential workers employed across public and private health, aboriginal health services, paramedicine, aged and disability care. Our members provided treatment, care and services to the most vulnerable members of our community across every part of the state. They are cleaners, cooks, carers, administration officers, radiation therapists, physiotherapists, social workers, aboriginal health practitioners, paramedics, security officers, wards persons, speech therapists, medical nuclear technicians, radiographers and many others. They are diverse in their occupations but united in providing essential services to the community.

The HSU recognises that the housing crisis is a profound intergenerational issue, which will hold significant ramifications for the NSW healthcare system. In partnering with community and industry groups through the Housing Now! Alliance, we aim to address the housing affordability crisis by advocating for innovative solutions, meaningful planning reforms, enhanced collaboration between government agencies and bold leadership to address the multifaceted issue of affordable housing.

The HSU submits this report to the Essential Worker Housing Inquiry at a time when bold and courageous reforms are urgently needed to tackle the worsening housing crisis. Our members are uniquely positioned to speak on the housing crisis, which affects them personally and in their roles as essential workers.

***“Adequate housing is essential for human survival with dignity.***

***Without a right to housing many other basic rights will be **compromised.**”***

Australian Human Rights Commission, 2009

***“I have accepted that I will never own a home and as I get older I will most likely be homeless. I have three qualifications and I’m on the edge of poverty.***

***I am broken.”***

HSU Member, Public Health- Allied Health

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# Executive Summary

## A Workforce on the Brink

Our members are facing severe financial pressure due to surging housing costs, with many spending over 70% of their income just to maintain a roof over their heads. This forces difficult choices between essentials, food, and housing. Many are skipping medication, forgoing healthcare, and living in unsafe conditions just to get by. Some commute up to four hours daily, are separated from their families, or remain in abusive situations due to the lack of affordable housing. Nearly 75% report that the housing crisis is seriously impacting their mental health.

## Housing Crisis = Healthcare Crisis

The New South Wales (NSW) Health system is experiencing alarming staff attrition, with over 10,000 workers leaving in the past year. An overwhelming 91% of respondents believe the lack of affordable housing is undermining the sector's ability to attract and retain staff. 60% of those surveyed are reconsidering their commitment to the health sector, while nearly 20% are actively seeking to leave.

## Lack of Housing Options for Health Sector Workers

Housing affordability has critically declined due to severe supply shortages and rising demand. This crisis disproportionately affects essential workers on low and moderate incomes, particularly in the health sector, where wage growth is rapidly falling behind inflation. Nearly 60% report difficulty finding affordable housing in their area, while 22% say it's completely inaccessible.

## Inequity in Current Housing Measures

Existing housing affordability initiatives primarily benefit middle to higher-income earners and select professions, often excluding lower-income workers. Many programs are not equitably targeted, leaving regional and rural areas underserved. Current policies are creating significant inequality in access to housing for essential workers.

## Need for Coordinated Government Action

While many NSW government MPs benefit from negative gearing on multiple investment properties, many HSU members struggle to afford a home, a disparity that is unacceptable. Without urgent government intervention, we risk locking an entire generation out of the housing market. Our members call for a coordinated response, including more government-built housing, diverse housing solutions, rent subsidies, and co-ownership schemes. Continued inaction will only widen the divide and worsen the current crisis.



# HSU Recommendations

## **Inclusion of all Health Sector Workers in the Provision of Assistance for Affordable Housing**

A government guarantee that all classifications under the Health Services Union are included in essential worker housing initiatives to support the diverse workforce that underpins critical health and community services across NSW.

## **Establish an NSW Housing Accountability Board**

An independent NSW Housing Accountability Board, which includes representatives from local communities, housing experts, and essential worker representatives. This board would be responsible for:

- **Annual Public Reporting:** Mandating the NSW Housing Minister and relevant government officials to report annually on housing stock, including progress toward building targets, affordability metrics, and gaps in family-sized homes and appropriate housing types.
- **Transparency and Accountability:** Conduct public forums to discuss these reports, allowing community members to provide input and hold the government accountable for its housing commitments.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Establishing clear metrics to evaluate progress and incentivise action, with the power to recommend policy adjustments, council planning and red tape minimisation based on data collected.

## **Increase Government Investment in Housing Supply and Broaden Essential Worker Housing Programs**

- **Support Construction:** Government to support the construction of at least 75,000 new homes annually by 2029.<sup>i</sup> 10% of all new housing stock built in NSW to be designated social and affordable housing, with a clear pathway to increase this to 20% by 2040.
- **Affordable Housing Solutions:** Implement 30% rent and interest rate subsidies, 50% co-ownership schemes, and low-deposit government-backed home loans.<sup>ii</sup>
- **Expand Initiatives:** Extend initiatives to cover regional and rural areas, include all health sector workers, and remove minimum wage requirements that currently exclude many in need from benefiting.

## **Provide Security and Safeguarding Policies for Renters**

Stronger government protections for renters to include a permanent ban on no-grounds evictions, tougher rental laws, and enhanced safeguards for tenants living in unsafe or uninhabitable housing, incorporating enforceable minimum housing standards.<sup>iii</sup>

<sup>i</sup>Number of new homes required based on NSW Government Housing Targets to meet the commitments of the National Housing Accord: NSW Government, Planning NSW, Housing Targets <https://www.planning.nsw.gov.au/policy-and-legislation/housing/housing-targets>

<sup>ii</sup>Subsidy and co-ownership values based on affordability impacts of these schemes from independent data: Gilbert C, Nasreen Z & Gurrán N. (2023) Tracking the Housing Situation, Commuting Pattern and Affordability Challenges of Essential Workers: a report prepared for HOPE Housing, Sydney: The University of Sydney and HOPE Housing.

<sup>iii</sup>Minimum housing standards as an broadening of the current NSW rental standards which not only address security and safety but also liveability, such as those provided by Tenants Victoria: <https://tenantsvic.org.au/advice/starting-your-tenancy/minimum-standards/>

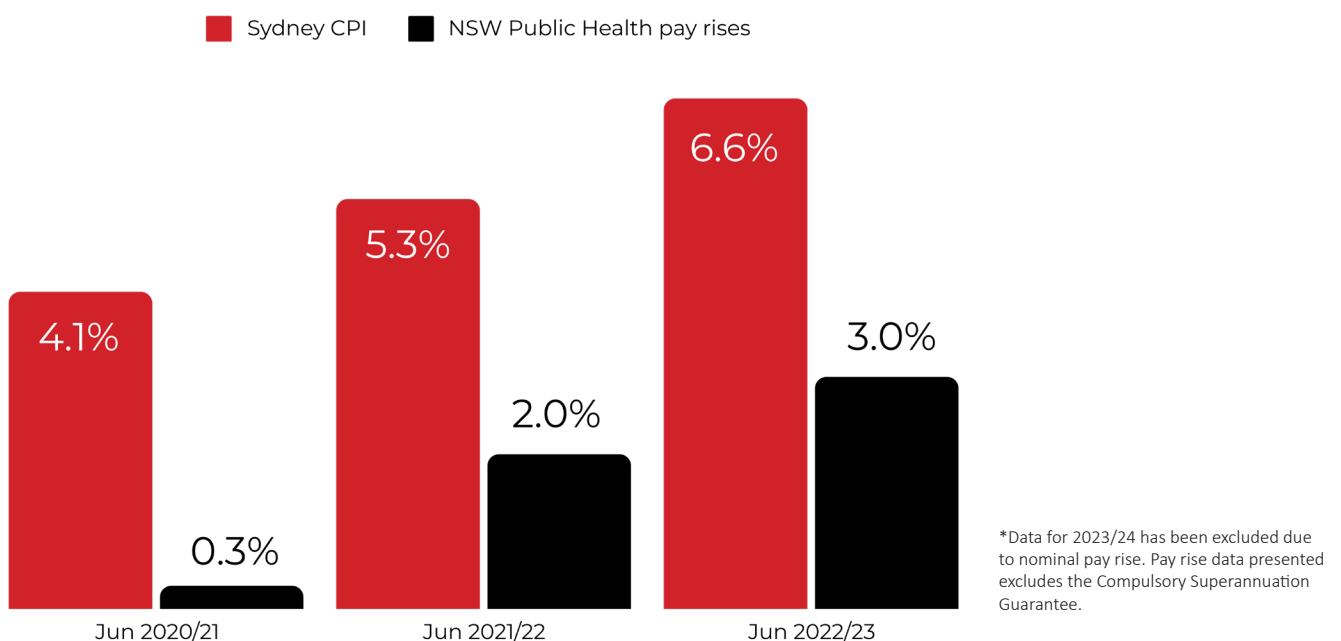
# NSW Health Sector Worker Housing Crisis

Behind every hospital, aged care facility, and disability service in NSW are the dedicated members of the Health Services Union (HSU), working tirelessly to ensure essential services are delivered to the community. However, inadequate housing policies are leaving many of these critical workers behind.

## Housing Affordability Crisis

The affordability of housing in NSW is at a critically low level, disproportionately affecting health sector workers on low to moderate incomes.<sup>1</sup> With public sector wages struggling to meet inflation and housing and rental costs surging, these workers are being pushed to the brink, struggling to meet their basic needs.<sup>2,3</sup>

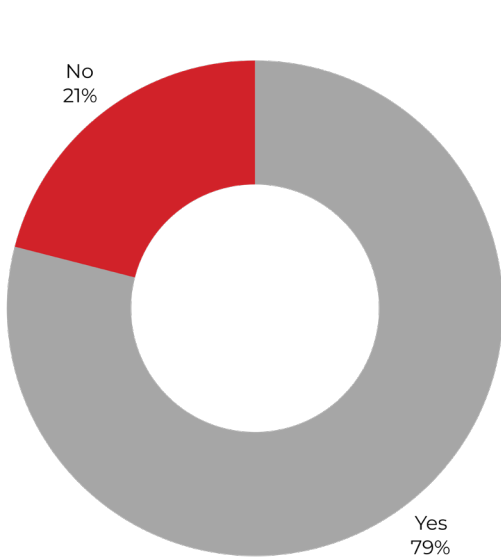
HSU calls on the NSW government to include all its members in essential worker housing initiatives. Current policies largely exclude low- to moderate-income health sector workers, forcing many into severe financial hardship and increasing the risk of poverty.<sup>4,5</sup>



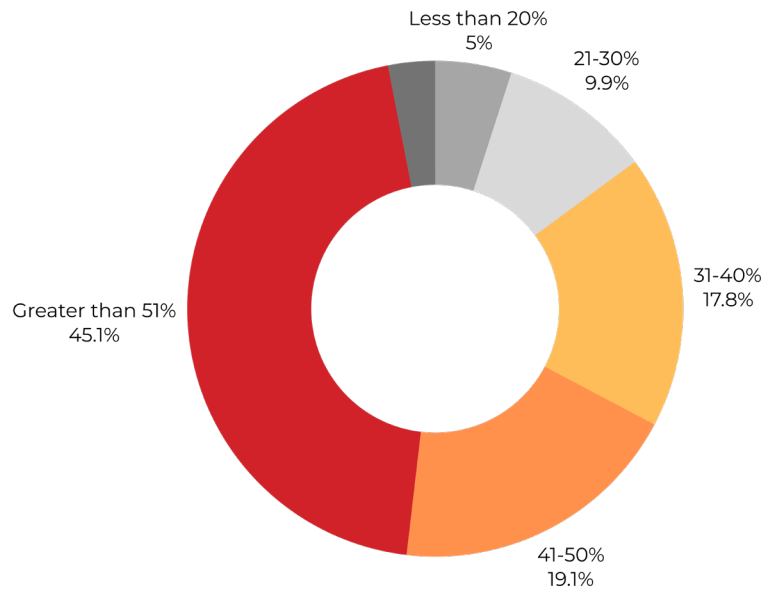
## Alarming Survey Findings

- **21% of health sector workers** reported having no access to suitable or appropriate accommodation. Living in overcrowded, hazardous conditions, in sheds, or in cars, some without proper insulation, heating, electricity, windows, or access to toilets. Many fear eviction or face unsustainable rent increases, with only some able to secure emergency accommodation or move back with family.
- **82% of respondents** experience financial stress, with over 30% of their income consumed by housing costs.
- **45% are in severe financial distress**, spending more than half their income on housing, while **12% face housing costs exceeding 70% of their income.**
- **31% feel insecure in their current housing situation.** **27 respondents** reported experiencing homelessness within the last 12 months, while **34 respondents** report they are at immediate risk of losing their homes
- **64% of respondents** stated that housing costs have severely impacted their ability to afford essentials like food, transportation, phone bills, medications, and basic utilities.

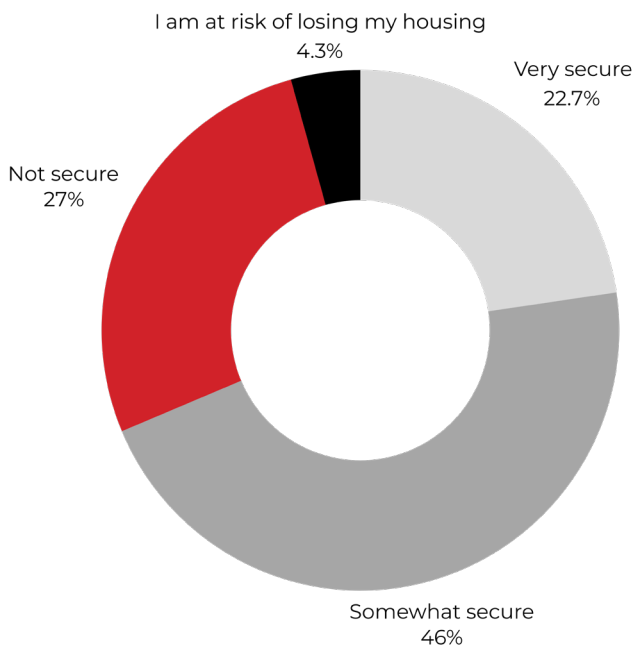




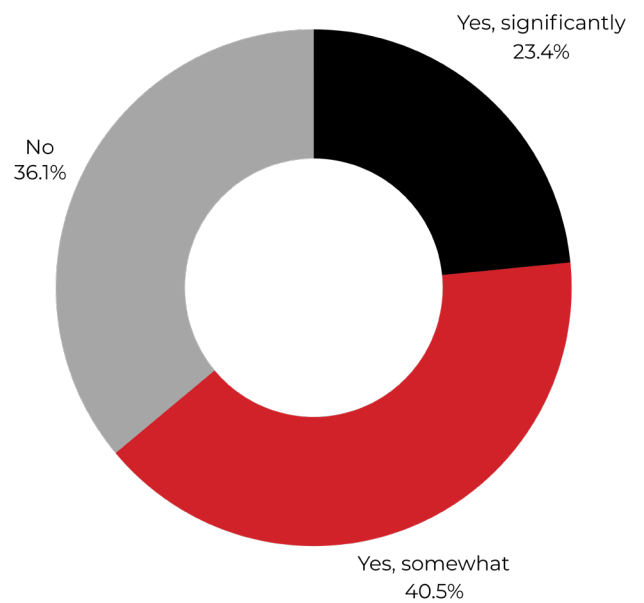
***Do you have suitable and appropriate accommodation?***



***On average, what percentage of your income is spent on housing costs (rent/mortgage and utilities)?***



***How secure do you feel in your current housing situation?***

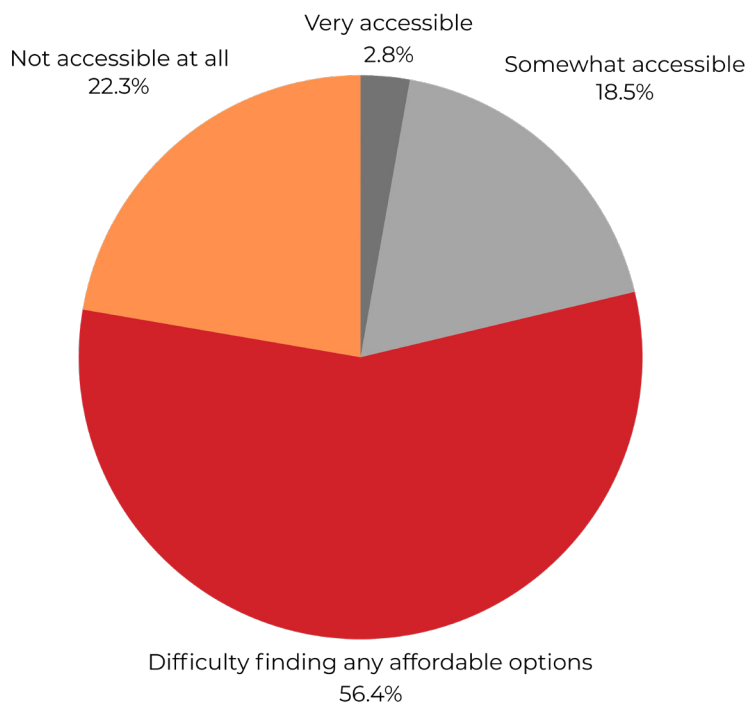


***Have housing costs impacted your ability to meet other basic needs (e.g. food, healthcare, transport)?***

## Limited Housing Options

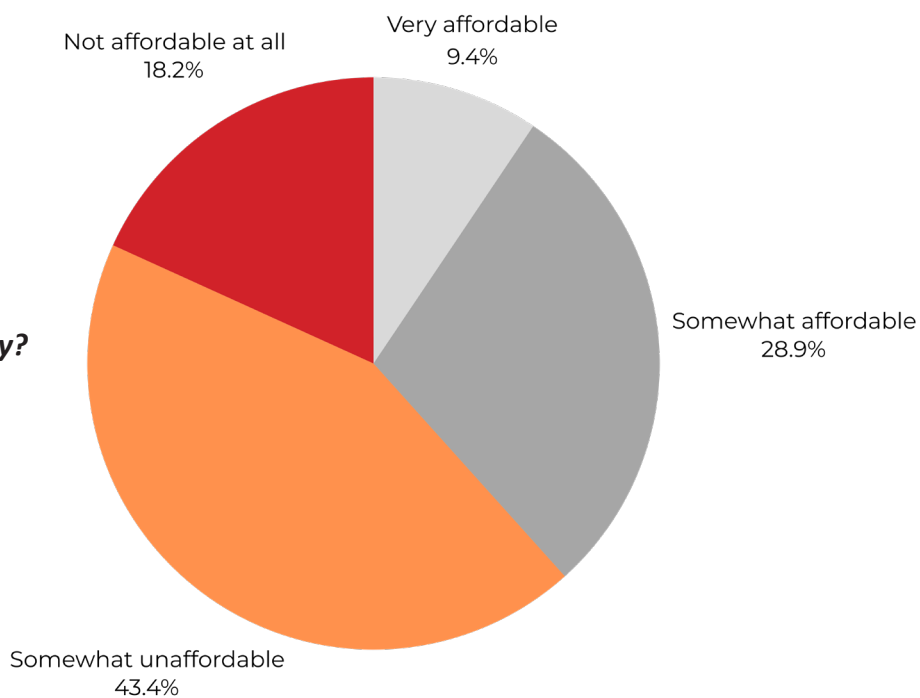
Health sector workers are finding it increasingly difficult to access affordable housing:

- **56% struggle to find affordable housing** in their area, while an additional **22% say it's completely inaccessible.**
- **62% report housing is unaffordable** relative to their salaries, with **18% finding it entirely out of reach.**



*How accessible is affordable housing in your current location?*

*How affordable do you find your current housing based on your salary?*

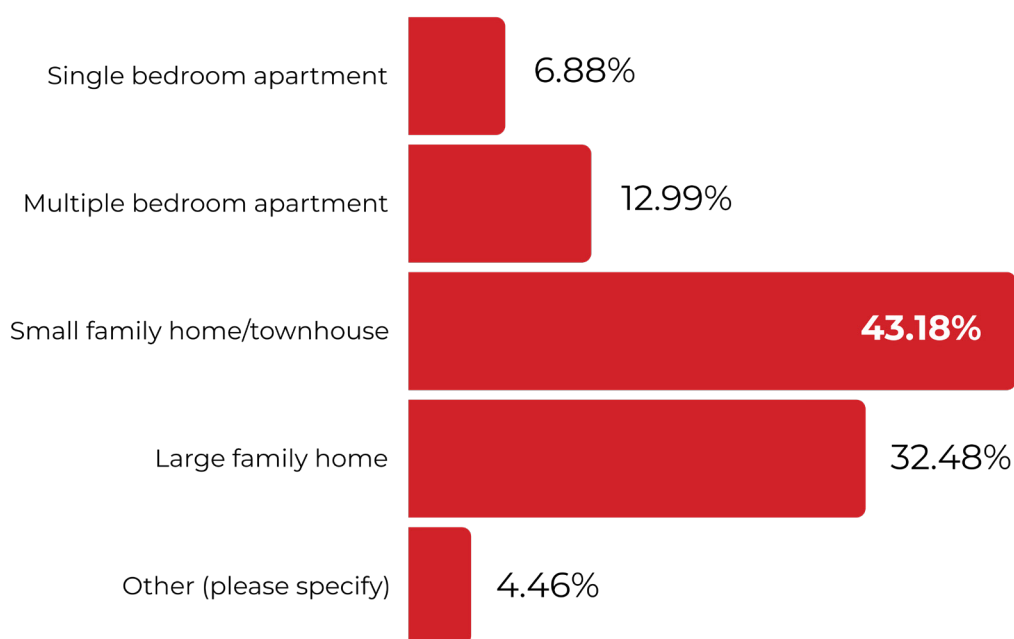


## Call for Support

Survey responses reveal a strong demand for a variety of support measures to alleviate the housing crisis among health sector workers, including:

- Pay increases linked to inflation.
- Subsidised interest rates and home loans.
- Rental caps and enhanced rental security.
- Government-led housing solutions such as rent-to-buy and build-to-rent schemes specifically catering to health workers and low- to moderate-income earners.
- A range of affordable housing options within a reasonable distance of workplaces
- Temporary living arrangements, staff quarters, and remote accommodations for shift workers.

Government-led schemes have proven successful both domestically and abroad, delivering modern, affordable housing options and reducing worker attrition.<sup>6,7</sup> These schemes can provide a crucial framework for a government response that prioritises the well-being of NSW's health sector workers.



***Ideally, what would suit your living circumstances?***

# In Their Voices: The Human Toll of the Housing Crisis

Health sector worker stories are a powerful reminder that the housing crisis is not just a policy issue—it is a human one. The health workers who provide essential services to our society are being failed by that same society. Their struggles are not just an unfortunate side effect; they are the devastating outcome of a system that prioritises profits over people. This cannot continue.

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***“I share this house with my husband. This relationship involves financial and emotional abuse. I can’t afford to leave because of the cost of housing and other factors.”***

A cry for safety hindered by the inaccessibility of housing.

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***“Rental accommodation was not available—I was forced to live in an uninsulated shed.”***

Struggling to find shelter in extreme conditions, where ‘home’ offers little comfort.

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***“I live with family 150km from my workplace. I travel to work in a camper van, and that same van serves as my accommodation while I’m at work.”***

A health worker’s dedication to their job comes at the cost of their own stability.

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***“During the first few years of my employment, I could only afford one meal a day and drank six litres of milk a week to stay full. I lost weight due to lack of nutrition.”***

The cost of working in healthcare—underfed and overworked—while housing insecurity affects physical health.

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***“I left domestic violence, and in 2022, my children and I were homeless.”***

Fleeing violence, only to end up on the streets, no refuge for a mother and her children.

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***“I live fortnight to fortnight some periods eating 2 min noodles and toast to get through just to pay the mortgage let alone if something breaks down, then the toast is sacrificed”***

Choosing between a roof over their heads or food on the table

# Danielle's Story

***“It was extremely tough financially...  
I often skipped meals”***



## **Danielle**

Former Aged Care Leisure and Lifestyle Officer in Port Macquarie

Danielle, a former Aged Care Leisure and Lifestyle Officer in Port Macquarie, shares her experience navigating the housing crisis:

*“Hi, my name is Danielle and I come from Port Macquarie. Even though it is seen as an idyllic spot, it has also been hit with a lack of housing, rising homelessness and cost of living.*

*I lived in an older house for over five years. During that time, we had asbestos-filled linoleum breaking apart under our feet, black mould growing. We had no oven for months, a continuous leaking roof, and high water and electricity bills.*

*My family stayed in this condemnable house because our family dynamics don't fit the nuclear family that real estate agents and landlords prefer. My sister and her two daughters came to live with me after fleeing a domestic violence situation.*

*Then our brother Ben came to stay with us after some time in Taree's Mental Health Unit. In 2021, I was diagnosed with Endometrial cancer, so our mum came up from Victoria to help me. My sister was then diagnosed with a benign brain tumour and three brain aneurysms, so mum stayed.*

*In May last year, the landlord decided not to renew our lease. I looked through over 70 properties and applied for 60 of them, all while working full time in aged care. There were up to 15 people looking at the same houses as me in one viewing.*

*Just before we ended up on the street, we were given temporary accommodation at an extra \$320 a week. In November, we ended up back to square one, and my family had to split up. My sister, kids, and mum got a place, but my brother (and Ben's son) and I ended up homeless. It was a direct consequence of becoming homeless, losing my family and the pets I had to rehome, that I had a mental breakdown.*

*Some of the problems on the Mid North Coast are not just the lack of houses, but the fact that many are uninhabitable. Real estates are also pushing rent increases to stupid limits.*

*I eventually got a house, and I share it with my brother and nephew. Although it was extremely tough financially, I often skipped meals. It was going well until I was made redundant last month. If I were looking for a rental now, I would have no hope with my employment situation.”*

Danielle's experience is a stark reminder of the challenges faced by many in securing safe and affordable housing in today's economy.

***“I ended up homeless, and it was a direct consequence ... that  
I had a mental breakdown”***

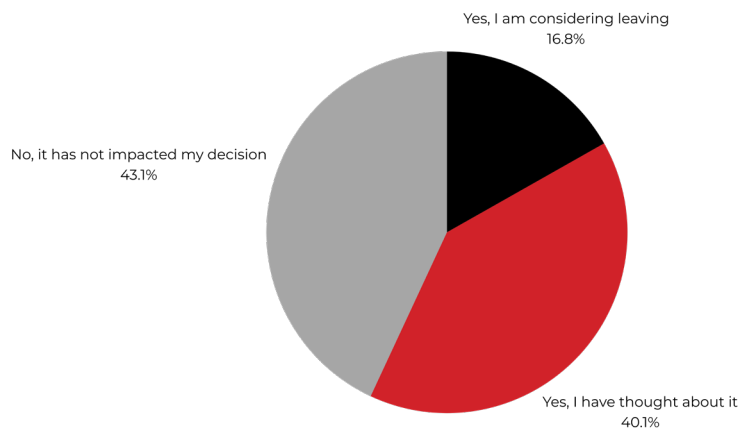
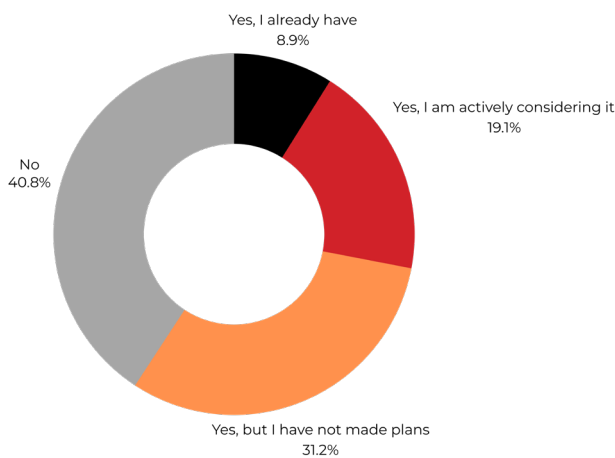
# NSW Housing Crisis a Healthcare Crisis

Adequate housing is a basic human right, encompassing protections against eviction, affordability that does not compromise other basic needs, a safe environment and proximity to employment and services.<sup>8</sup> The housing crisis extends beyond major cities to regional areas, which face a lack of resources, housing options, and support services. Danielle’s story is a powerful example of how housing insecurity deeply affects workers, and how, in a developed country, basic human rights remain unmet. Her experience also sheds light on how housing stress increases demands on the health system; **75% of survey respondents** reported that housing affordability has harmed their mental health.

## Impact on the Workforce

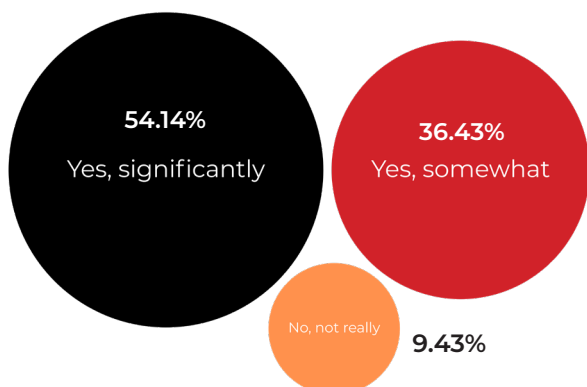
The NSW Health system is in the midst of a workforce crisis, having lost over 10,000 workers in the past year, and the impact of housing affordability on the workforce is undeniable:

- Some members are commuting over four hours a day just to get to work
- Almost **60% of respondents** have considered relocating due to housing costs, with almost 30% having already moved or actively seeking to.
- Almost **60% of respondents** say that high housing costs are influencing their decision to stay in the healthcare sector, and **17% are actively looking to leave entirely**.
- **91% believe that the lack of affordable housing** is directly undermining the sector’s ability to attract and retain the essential work force.



**Have you considered relocating due to high housing costs?**

**How accessible is affordable housing in your current location?**



**Do you think housing affordability impacts the ability of the healthcare workforce to attract and retain talent in your area?**

# Conclusion

While governments debate budgets and prioritise private equity investments, they overlook a devastating reality- in what was once a sustainable industry, essential workers now find themselves living near poverty, stripped of their fundamental human rights to safe and stable housing. The stories from our members are raw and emotional, reflecting the lived experience of working within a sector at breaking point. These are the same workers who were hailed as heroes by our government during the COVID-19 pandemic, yet they are now forced to go without food and safe housing just to continue serving their communities.

Behind the policies and figures are real people- dedicated to caring for others in their most fragile moments yet left vulnerable, desperate and fighting for survival, by a system that has failed them. This is not merely about affordability; it is about ensuring that those who care for us are not abandoned by the very society they are dedicated to serving. It is time for government budgets to reflect the value of these essential workers by prioritising their housing needs. We cannot turn our backs on them now; it is a moral obligation to support those who sustain our society.

## Acknowledgement

HSU extends its gratitude to the members who participated in the survey and shared their experiences with us. We also wish to express our deep appreciation to all health sector workers for their unwavering dedication to the communities they serve and to the healthcare workforce as a whole.



***“The rising cost of living has made it nearly impossible for working families like ours to stay afloat. Every month is a challenge, and the mental strain of balancing finances takes its toll on us all. Sharing this story is not easy, but it’s important for people to understand the impact inflation and housing costs are having on healthcare workers and families like ours. We are not asking for handouts but for an understanding that the current economic situation is unsustainable for many of us who are committed to our professions and our families. We need meaningful support and policy changes that can help working families cope with the increasing costs of living.”***

HSU Member, Public Health – Health Services



# Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Australian Government: National Housing Supply and Affordability Council, State of the Housing System 2024, <https://nhsac.gov.au/sites/nhsac.gov.au/files/2024-05/state-of-the-housing-system-2024.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>NSW Treasury, The NSW Economic Dashboard, <https://www.treasury.nsw.gov.au/nsw-economy/nsw-economic-dashboard>, accessed September 2024

<sup>3</sup>Australian Bureau of Statistics, Consumer Price Index, Australia, June Quarter 2024. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/price-indexes-and-inflation/consumer-price-index-australia/latest-release>

<sup>4</sup>Westpac Banking Corporation, Home Ownership Support of Nurses and Midwives, <https://www.westpac.com.au/personal-banking/home-loans/healthcare-lmi/#professions>

<sup>5</sup>HOPE housing, <https://hopehousing.com.au/for-essential-workers/>, accessed September 2024

<sup>6</sup>Defence Housing Australia, <https://www.dha.gov.au/housing>, accessed September 2024

<sup>7</sup>Department for Communities and Local Government, Evaluation of Key Worker Living: Final Report (2006). <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2006-08/apo-nid88736.pdf>

<sup>8</sup>United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, "OHCHR and the right to adequate housing" <https://www.ohchr.org/en/housing>



## Essential Worker Housing Inquiry