

Victorian family violence refuge eligibility and prioritisation framework

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Contents

[Introduction 4](#_Toc116747346)

[What is a family violence refuge? 4](#_Toc116747347)

[Purpose of this document 4](#_Toc116747348)

[Objectives 4](#_Toc116747349)

[Scope 5](#_Toc116747350)

[Principles 5](#_Toc116747351)

[Policy context 6](#_Toc116747352)

[Key parameters 7](#_Toc116747353)

[Assessment of eligibility 7](#_Toc116747354)

[Referral 8](#_Toc116747355)

[Matching 15](#_Toc116747356)

[Placement 17](#_Toc116747357)

# Introduction

## What is a family violence refuge?

Founded by the feminist movement of the early 1970s, family violence refuges today are a key part of Victoria’s family violence service system. Refuges are operated by community services using a mix of government funding,[[1]](#footnote-2) donations and grants. Some services operate solely as a refuge, but most deliver a broad range of other family violence and community support services as well. Refuges are part of a network of local service providers that offer a short-term safety and support response in a supported accommodation setting. They offer this to victim survivors and their children who are at high risk of injury or death due to family violence, and who cannot stay safely at home.

When the only option is to flee at the point of crisis, a refuge provides a critical, lifesaving option to victim survivors and their children. The locations of refuges are strictly confidential. They are staffed by on-site specialist family violence professionals. Refuges offer a stable, secure, supportive environment where victim survivors can begin to regain control over their lives while risk management strategies are put into place to prevent further family violence and hold perpetrators accountable and in view. A stay in refuge for temporary protection and support following family violence is always the choice of victim survivors, supporting their self-agency and should never be forced on them.

Refuges also provide critical practical and emotional support to victim survivors to help them heal from the trauma they have experienced. They help victim survivors to stabilise and regain control over their lives. They offer wraparound services that include multiple agencies working together to provide tailored support specific to the needs of adult and child victim survivors. This can include meeting basic needs, as well as providing therapeutic support and skill development to assist clients to safely return home or move to longer term accommodation.

Family violence and homelessness are interconnecting issues, with family violence being a major contributing factor to women’s and children’s homelessness. However, a refuge response is not a homelessness response. It cannot not be used instead of a referral to a homelessness service. Refuges are a crucial risk management intervention for which there is very significant demand. It is vital that refuge places are prioritised for victim survivors who most need this lifesaving intervention.

## Purpose of this document

This framework is the definitive source of policy and guidance to specialist family violence practitioners who refer, prioritise and place victim survivors into family violence refuge.

It is also a key enabler in the case management program requirements and crisis response model, clarifying the model of referral, prioritisation and placement for family violence refuge. It confirms the pivotal role of Safe Steps, the statewide 24/7 family violence crisis service, which is the central coordination point for referrals to refuge (via the Victorian Family Violence Accommodation Register (FVAR)) to support equity of access through a statewide ‘picture of risk’.

## Objectives

* To ensure victim survivors of family violence at highest risk of significant harm, injury or death are prioritised for family violence refuge places.
* To improve equity of access, consistency and transparency in the way refuge places are allocated to victim survivors.

## Scope

This framework is for professionals whose role directly relates to increasing victim survivor safety or addressing perpetrator risk under the Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management (MARAM) Framework. These professionals work across a range of services including The Orange Door network, Safe Steps, local family violence support services and family violence accommodation services.

Adult and child victim survivors who need refuge are identified by applying the comprehensive victim survivor tool, practice guidance and risk management resources of the MARAM Framework. A comprehensive risk assessment under MARAM is required to support a consistent approach to the identification and prioritisation of victim survivors for a refuge response. This ensures the victim survivors accessing refuge are those at highest risk of significant harm, injury or death who need the immediate protection of this critical, lifesaving intervention.

All parts of the service system have a shared understanding of risk assessment and management and the skills and a framework under MARAM to guide risk management. Professionals working in other parts of the service system may refer a victim survivor for specialist family violence support through one of the above services when they see a need. Refuge eligibility can be assessed through applying the comprehensive risk management resources of MARAM at this point if needed.

### Aboriginal refuges

Aboriginal refuges, operated by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), provide on-Country refuge accommodation and a culturally safe service response for Aboriginal victim survivors of family violence. Aboriginal refuges may choose to take part in the statewide referral process outlined in this document, working with Safe Steps if they wish to receive referrals through the FVAR.

### Short stay refuges

Five specialist family violence services operate short stay/supported accommodation refuges in Victoria. The short stay model can be a valuable option for victim survivors who cannot be placed safely and temporarily into a motel, or whose safety has been compromised after a motel placement.

Short stay refuges mostly work directly with Safe Steps to quickly accommodate victim survivors who need this type of intervention. Although short stay refuge providers were not originally in scope of the FVAR, it is open to them to use the application to support placement of victim survivors into their accommodation. In the main, short stay refuges and Safe Steps will continue to use existing approaches to allocate short stay refuge places to victim survivors.

## Principles

* A consistent approach to risk assessment, risk management and safety planning under MARAM is used to identify victim survivors’ who need refuge.
* A statewide picture of risk informs how victim survivors are prioritised to available refuge places.
* Victim survivors’ agency and choice are maximised in deciding the most suitable refuge placement.
* Victim survivors’ suitability for a refuge place is assessed in a non-discriminatory way, and an intersectional approach informs refuge eligibility, prioritisation and placement decisions.
* Refuge referral, prioritisation and placement is underpinned by open, transparent and timely communication and decision making.

## Policy context

This framework should be read in conjunction with Family violence crisis responses: roles and responsibilities in providing emergency accommodation. The roles and responsibilities document clarifies the roles and responsibilities of agencies delivering a response to victim survivors in crisis who need emergency accommodation due to serious family violence risk.

Also underpinning this work is:

* the Case management program requirements for specialist family violence services which work with victim survivors
* the Code of practice: principles and standards for specialist family violence services for victim survivors
* practice guides and tools outlined in MARAM.

# Key parameters

There are several decision points involved in placing a victim survivor in a family violence refuge:

* whether a victim survivor is eligible for refuge
* whether to refer an eligible victim survivor for a refuge response
* prioritising referred clients to ensure a placement is provided to those most in need of a refuge response
* matching and allocating a victim survivor to a suitable refuge vacancy.

The below section outlines the key considerations and requirements involved in each of these decisions.

## Assessment of eligibility

To determine eligibility for family violence refuge, a victim survivor’s level of risk must be assessed through a comprehensive MARAM assessment. The criteria for eligibility to refuge are outlined below.

### Refuge eligibility

A victim survivor is eligible for family violence refuge if they meet **all** the below criteria:

* Following a comprehensive risk assessment under MARAM, they are determined to be at serious and imminent risk of significant psychological or physical harm, injury or death from a family violence perpetrator and need immediate protection.
* They do not have access to alternative **safe** accommodation (for example, housing that is not known to the perpetrator).
* They need the added security features and intensive case management support offered by refuge. (In particular, to keep them safe when a violent perpetrator’s whereabouts are unknown and/or the perpetrator is actively trying to harm, injure or kill a victim survivor.)

If a victim survivor does not meet the threshold of risk described above, they are not eligible for refuge. They should be supported through other family violence risk management and tailored interventions.

The decision to refer a victim survivor to refuge first requires a process of considering individual needs and prioritisation factors. These are outlined in the next section (‘Referral’).

### Equal opportunity

Different aspects of a person’s identity can expose that person to overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalisation. These aspects can include gender, class, ethnicity and cultural background, religion, disability and sexual orientation. Specialist family violence services should appreciate the role that multiple sources of identity play in a person’s lived experiences. They should be accessible, inclusive and non-discriminatory and respond to the needs of diverse groups.

Specialist family violence support services, including family violence accommodation services, should provide an inclusive and non-discriminatory service. Complementary obligations are set out in Department of Families, Fairness and Housing policy and funding guidelines including the case management program requirements for specialist family violence services and the department’s Human Services Standards and accreditation process. There are also obligations in the [Code of Practice](https://safeandequal.org.au/working-in-family-violence/service-responses/specialist-family-violence-services/the-code-of-practice/) <https://safeandequal.org.au/working-in-family-violence/service-responses/specialist-family-violence-services/the-code-of-practice/> for specialist family violence services.

The Equal Opportunity Act 2010 requires that all organisations covered by the law – including accommodation and service providers – take reasonable and proportionate measures to eliminate discrimination, sexual harassment and victimisation. This is called the ‘positive duty’.

Under the Act, discrimination is not always against the law. Some actions will not be against the law if an exception to the Act applies, or where actions are a special measure to address inequality.

The welfare exceptions under the Act mean that it is not against the law to limit eligibility for refuge accommodation provided it has been ‘established wholly or mainly for the welfare of persons of a particular sex, age, race or religious belief’ and the person being excluded is not of that sex, age, race or religious belief’.[[2]](#footnote-3),[[3]](#footnote-4)

Under the Act, refuges may also take special measure ‘for the purpose of promoting or realising substantive equality for members of a group with a particular attribute’. This may involve refuges promoting access for LGBTIQ+ and gender diverse victim survivors. This is important, noting that family violence is reported at similar rates in same gender relationships. Trans and gender diverse people report high levels of violence, abuse, sexual violence and coercion and these groups face extra barriers to accessing services.[[4]](#footnote-5)

The groups mentioned above face significant barriers to service access. In particular, the law requires service providers to make reasonable adjustments to allow people with disabilities to take part in or access services, or to derive a major benefit from services. This is vitally important given people with disabilities make up 20 per cent of the population. Women with disabilities are 40 per cent more likely to experience family violence than other women and more than 70 per cent of women with disabilities have been victim survivors of sexual violence.

Service and accommodation providers are encouraged to take a human rights approach that balances the rights of those currently getting, and those wanting to get, support.

## Referral

### Statewide referral process

All referrals to family violence refuge places are managed through a statewide process coordinated by Safe Steps. This central coordination role is critical for equity-based refuge placement, ensuring refuge places are allocated to victim survivors who are at highest risk and most in need.

Safe Steps and refuge providers use the FVAR to manage the statewide referral process. This ensures victim survivors can be quickly matched to suitable refuge places.

Safe Steps will always prioritise placing a victim survivor into a refuge that is within their local area where there is one and it is safe to do so. But at times an out-of-area placement will be necessary. More detail about this is in the ‘Matching’ section of this document.

To support Safe Steps in its central coordination role, all referrals to refuge must be made through Safe Steps via a refuge referral form. All refuge places must be listed on the FVAR.

#### Local flexibility – compelling need for locally coordinated refuge response

From time to time there may be a compelling need for a victim survivor to rapidly access a place in a local refuge through a locally coordinated refuge response. Although access to a local refuge response (when safe to do so) is a cornerstone of the statewide referral process, a model of local flexibility is a sub-process of the statewide model.

The case for a victim to be placed under the local flexibility process is likely to be compelling if they are:

* linked with essential specialist supports such as a disability support service or mental health specialist in their local area and:
  + they would be unable to access this essential support if they moved away from the area, and/or
  + there would be a delay in getting support of this nature in other area, and/or
  + there is no certainty that suitable substitute service providers would be available in another area
* receiving a coordinated, multiagency service response to manage their risk and safety within the local area
* an Aboriginal victim survivor who needs to be placed or to stay in the local area to maintain or restore connections with culture, country, family, kinship and community networks. They have the right to choose whether they engage with Aboriginal-specific services or other specialist family violence services.

##### Local flexibility process

The local flexibility process involves consultation between local services to determine whether a local area victim survivor should be prioritised for an in-area refuge place ahead of others that are awaiting placement through the central coordination point.

Having undertaken a comprehensive risk assessment, a local specialist family violence support service or The Orange Door (the referring service) determines if a victim survivor needs a refuge response, completes a refuge referral form and lodges the referral with Safe Steps. The referring service also identifies a compelling need for an immediate in-area refuge placement and consults with the local refuge to see whether anything is available. When a place is or is about to become available, the referring service seeks the consent of the victim survivor to contact the refuge provider about the suitability of the available refuge placement.

If at this point the two services agree that the local refuge place is suitable and the victim survivor’s need for the available in-area placement is compelling, the referring service and local refuge must consult with Safe Steps to understand whether it is appropriate to prioritise the local referral above other victim survivors awaiting a refuge response across the state.

##### Consultation and decision making

In carrying out the central coordination role, Safe Steps is best positioned to maintain a statewide picture of risk through regularly prioritising referred victim survivors based on up-to-date information.

With this statewide picture of risk in mind, Safe Steps may identify that another victim survivor needs to access the available refuge place ahead of the household identified through the local flexibility process. This is most likely to occur when there is no other option to effectively manage the victim survivor’s risk.

The local refuge decides the best use of the available refuge place having weighed up all relevant factors. Safe Steps then actions the refuge’s decision through the FVAR.

An example of this approach is outlined below.

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| **Meeting local need through the statewide referral process**  The Orange Door, Safe Steps and a local family violence refuge service in a regional area working together to develop relationships and build capacity has improved the appropriateness of refuge referrals. All applications to the refuge are made via Safe Steps, with the local refuge also placing local victim survivors into their refuge quickly when needed.  When The Orange Door sees a compelling need for a local refuge response, they contact the local refuge to discuss the referral and carry out a secondary consultation. If the local refuge agrees that the referral meets the eligibility/referral threshold and there is a compelling need for a local refuge response, the local refuge advises The Orange Door to refer via Safe Steps. The local refuge informs Safe Steps of the pending referral and their capacity to accept.  The Orange Door and the local refuge consult with Safe Steps as required under the local flexibility process. Safe Steps must decide whether it is equitable and appropriate to prioritise the victim survivor for refuge. They must consider the needs of other victim survivors being managed by Safe Steps. Safe Steps actions the referral decision via the FVAR.  The referral process is a blended model with direct information sharing between The Orange Door and the refuge while still occurring via Safe Steps. |

### Minimum requirements for referring to refuge

Although a victim survivor may meet the eligibility criteria for the refuge program, a practitioner must consider several other factors before making the decision to refer the victim survivor for a refuge response. These relate to each victim survivor’s individual and family needs, safety and support. The below section outlines the minimum assessment requirements of specialist family violence practitioners needed prior to a referral to the refuge program. The information collected through this process is critical to informing prioritisation, matching and placement decisions.

#### MARAM assessment

The referring service must complete a comprehensive risk and needs assessment under MARAM before referring a victim survivor for a refuge response. If community services from other disciplines (mental health, homelessness support services) want to refer victim survivors to refuge, the victim survivor must be already linked with a specialist family violence service (including through The Orange Door) qualified to undertake this specialist assessment. At the least, contact must have been made with a specialist family violence service to complete this activity before the referral.

It is not always possible or safe for a comprehensive risk and needs assessment to be completed at the point of crisis. As such, it is reasonable that this will be completed within 72 hours of a victim survivor being placed into emergency accommodation.

When referring a victim survivor for refuge, the referring service must provide their comprehensive risk and needs assessment to Safe Steps. They must also include the refuge referral form. The referral form requires the following factors to be considered.

##### Victim survivor’s current circumstances and what has prompted the referral to refuge

Each victim survivor’s current circumstances must be considered. This includes what has prompted the decision to refer them to refuge. This should include information about:

* the perpetrator’s behaviour and actions that have resulted in the timing of the refuge referral
* whether the whereabouts of the perpetrator is known
* whether the perpetrator is actively trying to find the victim survivor.

##### Victim survivor support needs

The support needs of each victim survivor in the family group (including children) must also be considered. Information gathered through the MARAM assessment process should be informed by an intersectional approach that understands how structural inequalities, oppression and systemic marginalisation might affect the family violence risk and support needs of victim survivors. An intersectional approach acknowledges systemic discrimination has an impact on a victim survivor’s access to opportunity due to factors including:

* sexual orientation and identity
* gender and gender identity
* race
* economic status
* immigration status
* country of origin
* ability.

Other relevant factors include:

* income and debts
* residency/visa status[[5]](#footnote-6)
* legal needs
* physical health
* mental health (including self-harm and suicidality)
* educational enrolment
* employment
* disability
* alcohol and other drug (AOD) misuse/dependence
* any cultural needs[[6]](#footnote-7)
* the needs of accompanying pets or other household members.

This information is helpful in understanding:

* the urgency and extent of the victim survivor’s circumstances and support needs
* contextual factors that may limit the safety or feasibility of their stay in refuge.

These factors play an important role in prioritisation decisions.

##### Victim survivor safety considerations

Agencies must get an understanding of the victim survivors’ particular safety concerns including:

* the systemic failures to keep the perpetrator accountable
* which areas are unsafe for the victim survivor
* whether there is evidence the perpetrator is actively trying to find them (including victim survivors from interstate who have fled to Victoria due to the risk posed by perpetrator)
* whether they have their own transport
* whether an e-safety check of their phone, car and other personal devices has been undertaken,
* any safety issues that have come up while the victim survivor has been in emergency accommodation.

##### Children

Children and young people in the care of an adult victim survivor must be assessed as victim survivors in their own right. This includes identifying and monitoring current and emerging risks to each child and young person due to the perpetrator’s behaviour. The child’s experience of violence should be understood using the child screening tool, whether directly or through the adult victim survivor if the age of the child prevents direct engagement.

A sound understanding of the impact of family violence and trauma on children and young people is required to inform appropriate, child-focused, developmentally appropriate and culturally safe responses, including in the area of accommodation. This includes understanding the complex relationship children have with the perpetrator of family violence and their potential wish to stay connected and repair relationships.

Stability for children including positive relationships with the primary carer, and their connectedness to places and friends, siblings and other significant adults in their lives, are important considerations.

#### Referral to refuge is the victim survivor’s choice

Victim survivors have a right to make choices and decisions about matters that affect them. Consideration must be given to whether a referral to refuge is in line with victim survivors’ wishes.[[7]](#footnote-8) The referring agency should flag refuge as a potential response with victim survivors. This should follow a brief discussion about what a stay in refuge will mean for them and their family. This includes people’s willingness to accept restrictions on visitor contact, location secrecy and facility rules, weighed against the enhanced safety benefits of hiding in a secure, supported accommodation facility. In a refuge, they can be well supported by specialist family violence practitioners while their risk is mitigated through other system supports and justice interventions.

## Prioritisation

Following receipt of a refuge referral, Safe Steps prioritises victim survivors for available refuge places. Careful prioritisation is required to ensure that available refuge places are given to those who need it most.

Refuge prioritisation is primarily based on the **severity of family violence risk**. Secondary considerations relate to victim survivors’ individual circumstances and support needs that might increase the need for a refuge placement or inform the decision about whether the secure model of care offered in refuge is the most appropriate option for that person or family.

The section below highlights the key considerations that inform prioritisation decisions. Because refuge placements are a point-in-time intervention that **can only occur where places exist**, these decisions will always be made in the context of the availability of refuge places at the time of referral.

A victim survivor who is already in a refuge can be prioritised for relocation to another refuge if their level of risk meets the eligibility threshold and they need to be moved quickly for safety reasons. Examples include:

* a perpetrator discovers a victim survivor’s refuge location
* the victim survivor is in a short-stay refuge/supported accommodation and the service provider determines that they need to stay in refuge beyond the usual short stay timeframe
* the placement is at risk of breaking down for reasons that could not be foreseen when the initial placement was made.

Safe Steps will prioritise relocating victim survivors in refuge based on risk assessment advice from refuge services. Although relocations should be managed through Safe Steps and the FVAR, a refuge service may negotiate another placement directly with another refuge provider if necessary.

#### Family violence risk level (determined through MARAM)

Family violence risk is the primary driving factor in prioritising a family violence refuge placement. As outlined above, risk level should be determined through a comprehensive risk and needs assessment under MARAM. Those at serious and imminent risk of significant psychological or physical harm, injury or death from a family violence perpetrator will need immediate protection and should be prioritised for a refuge response.

There may be other circumstances related to risk that are not fully or not yet recorded in a MARAM assessment that are important to consider when prioritising places for refuge. These include:

* an understanding of the recency, severity and immediacy of family violence risk
* concerns raised or documented by other service professionals
* the broader community context in which it has occurred
* previous system responses that have failed to prevent the perpetrator’s violence
* intensifying, overt, calculating and immutable perpetrator behaviours that increase the specific need for refuge.

For example, agencies should consider:

* any legal or justice interventions in progress
* whether the perpetrator’s location is known
* the perpetrator’s historical behavioural patterns of obsessiveness, coercive control, stalking, spying and serious assaults on victim survivors they have targeted
* a perpetrator’s clear disregard for the law.

Family violence risk assessment is dynamic and ongoing throughout a victim survivor’s transition through the service system and journey to safety and healing. Prioritisation decisions are further informed by any changes in family violence risk level, and how urgently the response is needed and an appropriate refuge place can be found.Referring services should aim to provide Safe Steps with updated risk assessment advice every week. (Refer to ‘Where a victim survivor is waiting for an available refuge place’ below.)

#### Complex life circumstances and support needs

Refuge prioritisation decisions should also be informed by:

* an understanding of any complex life circumstances a victim survivor may be experiencing
* any limitations to or lack of protective factors
* emerging risk to children because of the perpetrator’s behaviour
* the extent and urgency of their support needs.

Victim survivors may be experiencing multiple life stressors and hardships that:

* compound their family violence risk
* further their trauma
* impair healthy coping strategies
* represent a potential barrier to the effectiveness of most service responses
* place them at risk of statutory interventions
* mean they cannot be supported or kept safe in a non-residential service or other accommodation option (such as a motel).

This will mean they have a clearly greater need for the intensive wraparound support that a refuge can provide.

An example of this is a victim survivor at serious and imminent family violence risk who is also experiencing mental health and AOD misuse issues. A placement in a refuge may be the only option that can:

* adequately mitigate the victim survivor’s level of family violence risk
* address the other support needs resulting from mental health and AOD misuse (possibly through coordinated partnership approaches with other services).

Refuges have a responsibility to tailor supports and services to meet victim survivors’ complex life circumstances while keeping a safe and inclusive environment for all victim survivors at the refuge. Refuges have processes to activate emergency services when victim survivors need an urgent clinical assessment or reach a crisis point with their health, mental wellbeing or AOD use, or when their safety or other people’s safety is compromised.

Refuges are in a unique position to assess and respond to the needs of children because they are more likely to have direct contact with children than other types of family violence services. A placement in refuge can help to repair the mother–child bond which could have been sabotaged by the perpetrator. It can help stabilise children’s trauma responses by modelling safe family life through specialist programs and predictable routines. The presence of children, their unique family violence risk, support needs, challenges and strengths must inform prioritisation decisions. But it should not determine them – a victim survivor without children should not be disadvantaged in their access to refuge.

Complex life circumstances may include:

* mental health, disability and chronic health issues
* surviving natural disasters and assaults
* homelessness
* physical injuries and pain
* problematic AOD use
* community violence and stigma
* generational poverty
* historical and institutional trauma
* previous confinement in clinical care settings
* experience of incarceration or immigration detention
* cultural or faith identity
* LGBTIQ+ identity
* social isolation or a perceived lack of community support and connection.

These are all factors that can increase vulnerability to targeting by perpetrators of family violence, erode trust in the services system and present obstacles to service engagement.

## Matching

Alongside prioritisation is a process of matching a victim survivor to an available refuge place that can meet their support needs, safety considerations and the needs of any accompanying children. This is undertaken to facilitate a placement that will ensure the best outcomes and accessibility to victim survivors who need refuge.

Safe Steps matches victim survivors to a refuge that meets their needs. They do this through the FVAR, which provides them with real-time visibility of refuge places available across the state. The FVAR also has a detailed refuge profile that includes information about:

* the supports and services provided by each refuge
* whether the refuge is run by an ACCO and, if so, whether its services are specifically for Aboriginal victim survivors
* the physical features of the refuge
* information about the available place (number of rooms, wheelchair accessibility, location, proximity to amenities, distance from public transport and schools, and ability to accommodate pets).

Family violence refuges must keep the information about their refuge places (service offering, physical facility features) on the FVAR up to date to ensure Safe Steps can make matching decisions based on the most accurate information. If refuges would like to highlight service offerings or areas of expertise unique to their refuge, they should update this through the FVAR.

Safe Steps and refuges should meet regularly to discuss refuge places and referrals. This regular engagement helps Safe Steps to build and maintain a nuanced and up-to-date understanding of any unique service offerings and specialist expertise offered by each refuge. This facilitates informed and appropriate matching decisions. Ongoing communication between Safe Steps and refuges also provides an opportunity for continuous improvement of the referral process through sharing and understanding feedback about referrals, placements and client outcomes.

The information collected during the referral process about a victim survivor’s needs is critical to the matching process. When making a referral to refuge, Safe Steps must give as much information as possible about the victim survivor’s risk and needs in order to facilitate a timely and appropriate outcome to the proposed placement. The FVAR can facilitate this through the ‘send case to refuge’ workflow by including extra information (beyond the MARAM comprehensive risk assessment) that is captured in the referral form, and basic information like the victim survivor’s contact number and best time of day to call.

### Considerations involved in matching decisions

The Royal Commission into Family Violence noted the importance of ensuring victim survivors can receive the safety response they need when fleeing violence while also staying connected to their local community, support networks and employment. It is critical to note that many victim survivors will need to move away from their local area due to the risk posed by the perpetrator.

#### Primary consideration informing refuge matching

The primary consideration in matching a victim survivor to refuge is safety. Safe Steps will prioritise the placement of a victim survivor within or near their local area whenever possible if the victim survivor wants this and **it is safe and appropriate to do so**. However, the overriding consideration is the victim survivor’s safety and the location of the refuge must be suitable based on the victim survivor’s specific safety needs. Considerations include whether the perpetrator lives/works in the area and whether the perpetrator has family/friends who live nearby.

#### Secondary considerations informing refuge matching

* Physical features of the refuge facility and available place – This may include:
  + the number of beds or size of the unit available at the refuge (for example, a family of five would need to be matched to a place that can take the whole family)
  + any accessibility features of the place (for example, someone with a mobility/disability needs may be better suited to a refuge operating 24/7, or may need a place that meets specific accessibility requirements)
  + ability to accommodate pets or support a pet’s needs offsite
  + the level of communal versus independent living.
* Proximity to amenities such as supermarkets, schools, public transport, specific medical practitioners, pharmacies that dispense specific medications. For example, a family with four school aged children may be better suited to a refuge within walking distance to a school.
* Location of the refuge in promoting stability for children – This includes positive relationships with the primary carer, and their connectedness to places and friends, siblings and other significant adults in their lives. These connections are critical to a child’s development and should be a focus for specialist family violence services.
* Unique service offering and specialist expertise – The matching and referral process is not a booking service. It must strive to best meet the needs of the victim survivor and their entire household.
* Cultural considerations – All refuges have a responsibility to ensure their service is accessible, culturally responsive and inclusive, with processes to identify and meet the needs of diverse communities and age groups. They should refer to targeted services if victim survivors prefer or require this. In some cases, however, there may be a particular refuge place available that is better able to ensure victim survivors’ connection to family, friends, community and culture, for example:
  + ACCOs run Aboriginal refuges. They were set up to provide a local response to Aboriginal victim survivors. Not all Aboriginal victim survivors will want to be placed into an ACCO refuge. Their agency and choice in preferencing a mainstream or ACCO run refuge must be respected.
  + A refuge may be located in an area that enables the victim survivor to build, rebuild and strengthen their connections with family, friends and community. Included in this is opportunities for victim survivors to take part in decision making and get involved in their chosen community, noting that communities can be either socially, culturally or geographically based. Building and strengthening these relationships helps create a net of support and protection for victim survivors, noting that strong relational connections are central in promoting life prospects, stabilisation and freedom from violence.

### Where a victim survivor is waiting for an available refuge place

Refuges are a crucial risk management intervention for which there is very significant demand. The outcome of a risk-based prioritisation and matching process in the context of high demand and limited refuge resources inevitably leads to a situation of unmet demand and long periods to find a refuge placement. This may also mean a victim survivor needs to be placed in a motel while they wait for a suitable refuge vacancy.

Information about support expectations while a victim survivor is awaiting a refuge response is outlined in the Family violence crisis responses: roles and responsibilities in providing emergency accommodation document (refer to the ‘Crisis responses for victim survivors prioritised for a family violence accommodation service placement’ section). The below information should be read in conjunction with this document.

Expectations while a victim survivor is awaiting a refuge include the following:

* If an application to refuge has been made by a local family violence support service or through The Orange Door, they should continue to lead support while the victim survivor waits for a refuge response. For the local family violence support service, this may include face-to-face outreach in line with the program requirements as well as activating an after-hours service if needed. For The Orange Door, this may include activating episodic face-to-face outreach from the local The Orange Door partner agency and/or a local after-hours service.
* Once the application has been made, the lead support agency (local family violence support service or The Orange Door) **must** provide, at a minimum, a **weekly update** to Safe Steps about whether the refuge response continues to be needed and to provide any updated information about risk.
* Safe Steps **must** also continue to provide information to the lead support agency about the likelihood of securing a refuge response and expected timeframes. This will support the lead agency to use their local systems knowledge to plan for other safe exit options when it is unlikely that the victim survivor will be placed in refuge.
* Where a victim survivor self-refers to Safe Steps and an application to refuge has been made, Safe Steps should retain lead support for the victim survivor and activate episodic outreach from the local The Orange Door partner agency and/or local after-hours agency as needed. If the victim survivor is in a motel for two weeks, Safe Steps should work with the victim survivor to see if they would benefit from more comprehensive case management support from a local family violence support service. If a victim survivor says they want local case management support, Safe Steps should provide a facilitated referral them to the local The Orange Door partner agency for case management support.

A victim survivor’s application to refuge should stay open with Safe Steps until either:

* a refuge placement has been secured
* a safe accommodation option has been found
* their risk level changes such that a refuge response is no longer needed.

In cases where a victim survivor has been waiting for a refuge response in a motel, and no refuge vacancy can be found, the lead support agency must use their systems knowledge to find an option that can manage the victim survivor’s risk.

## Placement

Where a refuge place is found that meets the victim survivor’s support needs, safety considerations and the needs of any accompanying children, Safe Steps sends the referral to the family violence refuge via the FVAR.

The refuge will usually contact the victim survivor after receiving the referral from Safe Steps to organise their placement in the refuge and to plan for a safe transition to the refuge. This conversation is not about reassessing the victim survivor’s eligibility for the refuge place. It is about preparing the victim survivor to come into the refuge. This includes ensuring the victim survivor is aware of what their stay in the refuge will mean for them and their family, and to understand the expectations, including any security measures, they may need to meet while staying in the refuge.

Victim survivors have the right to make an informed decision about whether a refuge is right for them. A conversation between the refuge and victim survivor at this point should ensure the victim survivor has the information to make that informed choice, and to plan for their entry into refuge. A refuge placement may not be able to go ahead if the victim survivor’s acceptance has been influenced or coerced by another support service or statutory service provider. There is a heightened risk that the refuge placement will break down under such circumstances.

To prevent further assessment at this point, Safe Steps has a responsibility to ensure that an up-to-date comprehensive MARAM assessment is provided to the refuge, along with all other relevant information collected during the referral process.[[8]](#footnote-9) This is not only important to prevent further reassessment of victim survivors but also to prevent situations where a referral does not proceed because information relevant to the placement only comes to light late in the process.

Past breaches should not be a barrier to entry into refuge. Victim survivors must be actively informed about facility rules and routines. Staff must be supported to apply those rules consistently and fairly to ensure eviction of residents for rule breaches is always a last resort to prevent homelessness. Decisions about placing a victim survivor who has previously been in the refuge should be assessed on a case-by-case basis. Decisions should consider the safety of the victim survivor and the likelihood that the perpetrator has discovered the location of the refuge.

Where a placement goes ahead, refuge agencies must work with the victim survivor to plan for safe entry into the refuge.

### Where a placement into refuge does not proceed

Refuges make the decision about whether a placement is to go ahead or not. The circumstances under which a placement does not proceed should be limited. A refuge cannot refuse a person based on their sexuality, nor that they are unaccompanied by children, have a disability, or are a sex worker.[[9]](#footnote-10)

Refuges must also allocate places in line with the Guideline: Family violence services and accommodation – Complying with the Equal Opportunity Act 2010. This includes planning for any person with a protected characteristic or companion animals and accommodating them within the facility whenever possible.

Refuges have a very good understanding of their facilities and who they are accommodating at any given time. The core and cluster model of refuges provides households with greater privacy than was possible under the model of communal refuge it replaced. Through their work with victim survivors in a core and cluster refuge setting, refuge services are well placed to understand the risks to existing and proposed residents that might be associated with a new refuge placement and the actions that they can take to reduce these risks. Where a refuge service identifies that a placement poses potential risks to the victim survivor or others that cannot be managed, the refuge service must consult with Safe Steps before deciding that a placement cannot go ahead.

Where a placement does not proceed, the refuge refers the client back to Safe Steps. The refuge **must** give feedback via the FVAR about the reasons the referral cannot go ahead so that Safe Steps can update its records to facilitate the victim survivor’s next refuge referral. Safe Steps must support the victim survivor through matching to another refuge place following the process outlined in the above section ‘Where a victim survivor is waiting for an available refuge place’.

1. Refuge operations in Victoria are mostly funded under Activity 38034: Supported Accommodation Family Violence [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. *Equal Opportunity Act 2010*, section 60, and the [*Equal opportunity guideline: family violence and accommodation*](https://www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/resources/family-violence-services-and-accommodation-guideline/) <https://www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/resources/family-violence-services-and-accommodation-guideline/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. The welfare accommodation exception is limited to specific protected characteristics (sex, age, race or religious belief). It does not allow services to discriminate because of other protected characteristics such as disability, sexual orientation, marital status, parental status or lawful sexual activity. This means a refuge cannot refuse to accommodate a person on the basis they are lesbian/gay/bisexual, are unaccompanied by children, have a disability, or are a sex worker. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Carmen M, Fairchild J, Parsons M, et al. 2020, *Pride in prevention*, Rainbow Health Victoria, https://opal.latrobe.edu.au/ndownloader/files/29088549. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Visa status relates to vulnerability, including lack of options other than returning to the perpetrator, and lack of access to systems to assist with moving from refuge to more stable accommodation. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. For clients from migrant and refugee background it is essential that the CALD section of the comprehensive MARAM is completed to provide an accurate indication of cultural needs. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. It is an important consideration that many clients from migrant and refugee backgrounds may have very low system literacy. This can result in confusion about what the client’s options are – for example, declining refuge because they want more stable accommodation, not realising this may not be available at that time. ‘Refuge’ can also have very specific negative connotations for people from refugee backgrounds, who have spent time in refugee camps. Aboriginal victim survivors might also want to exercise choice about whether they are referred to a refuge that is run by an ACCO or a mainstream service. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. See the minimum requirements for refuge referral section for critical information that must be considered/collected for a referral to refuge to be made. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Not proceeding with a refuge placement because of a victim survivor’s disability, sexual orientation, marital status, parental status or lawful sexual activity – all protected characteristics – is unlawful. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)