A National Homelessness Strategy: why we need it

Strengthening the service response to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness

April 2017

Homelessness Australia
Creating a framework for ending homelessness

Contents

1 Executive Summary

Australia is at a critical juncture in its approach to supporting some of its most vulnerable people. How a nation chooses to provide housing and support to those in need, underpins its commitment to the safety and security of its peoples, and is a measure of its contract to care for all.

Central to this commitment is our country's Specialist Homelessness Services system (SHS) which provides almost 300,000 Australians each year, with vital homelessness services skilled to assist them in their hour of need. SHS deliver high quality, client centred services across Australia. These prevent and end homelessness through a range of crisis, short and longer-term support services to people that are at risk of or experiencing homelessness. SHS work to minimise the damage wreaked by homelessness on individuals, families, children and the community. Our SHS strive to maximise pathways out of homeless and away from its costs to health and well-being, while maximising social and economic participation outcomes.

Since 2013, the Australian Government has failed to commit to an ongoing funding program that has seen SHS struggle to plan for ongoing and effective service delivery. This has to stop. Australia requires a sustained commitment to growing the existing National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness and National Affordable Housing Agreement homelessness funding. A five -year funding package is needed to enable SHS to sustain their development and delivery of contemporary, evidence based service models to vulnerable people.

Housing affordable to those on the lowest incomes, and the support needed to both access and keep it, is the foundation of an effective approach to homelessness. Currently, there is a severe shortage of social housing and the private rental market is becoming virtually inaccessible to people on low incomes or income support. The current increase in homelessness is directly related to the lack of safe and secure affordable housing. A National Affordable Housing Strategy is urgently needed that includes a commitment to maintain and grow the existing National Affordable Housing Agreement, including growth in social housing.

Homelessness Australia is calling for:

1) A national homelessness strategy that takes best practice to scale

Recommendations:

- That the Commonwealth Government commit to a National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH), funded for five years, with funding linked to CPI increases. This will enable SHS to continue to deliver innovative and high quality services to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and with funding growth, enable the NPAH services to be provided across the service system.
- That the Commonwealth Government maintain the $275 million funding provided to homelessness services under the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA).
- That a National Homelessness Strategy is developed to drive NPAH and NAHA goals.
- That a homelessness research and evaluation agenda is resourced to continue to build the evidence base for high quality and effective responses to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

2) Build streamlined access

Recommendations:
- Strengthen client service pathways to support people in need to access effective and evidence based service responses. Clear access points combined with a system wide ''no wrong door'' approach to the service system including streamlined assessment processes.
- That State and Territory based human services outputs be framed to drive collaboration across programs and jurisdictions to strengthen client pathways to the most appropriate service response.

3) Housing First

Recommendations:

- That Housing First underpins the homelessness response across Australia. This requires:
    – A supply of social housing to meet demand.
    – Housing First to be established as the foundation to allocation policy across social housing programs.
    – Support services resourced to provide the level of support required to assist individuals and families establish and maintain their tenancies.
    – Appropriate calibration of the model for different cohorts including rough sleepers, people leaving custody, people with complex needs, families and young people.
- That services are funded to continue housing support for as long as required to maximise success.
- Funding to provide appropriate packaged support for clients with complex needs.

4) Rapid Rehousing

Recommendations:
- That ongoing funding is allocated for Rapid Rehousing programs including to assist women and their children escaping domestic and family violence to establish secure housing.

5) Preventing tenancy breakdown

Recommendations:
- Specific funding is allocated to Specialist Homelessness Services to strengthen support services to minimise tenancy failures in both private and social housing.
- An output measure is established to monitor evictions into homelessness from social housing providers.

6) **Short and medium term accommodation**

Recommendations:

- That the ongoing need for crisis and transitional housing programs is encompassed in a new homelessness strategy and funding model.
- That Specialist Homelessness Services are adequately resourced to provide crisis support to women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence, in line with the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children.

7) **Deliver integrated services to prevent homelessness**

Recommendations:
- That homelessness early intervention activities with measurable targets be built into all government program reforms to establish responsibilities to undertake homelessness early intervention work within mental health, drug and alcohol, domestic and family violence, out of home care, and justice.
- That young people are identified as a key client cohort requiring investment to prevent and respond to homelessness, within a National Homelessness Strategy. The Strategy should set key targets and identify the resources required to integrate service delivery responses across child protection, youth justice, disability and youth homeless service responses with a goal of ending youth homelessness.
- That Reconnect funding is increased and service delivery restored and provided across all high need areas in Australia;
- That older people are identified as a key client cohort, requiring investment to prevent and respond to homelessness within a National Homelessness Strategy. This should include the development of an integrated service model to drive coordination and collaboration between homelessness, housing and aged care health services to prevent homelessness and facilitate ageing in place prioritising the particular vulnerabilities of older women.
- That the Government engage with the National Disability Insurance Agency to develop strategies to intervene early and respond to homelessness effectively for its clients with a disability.
- Legislation adopts universal design standards to ensure that mainstream housing is physically accessible to people with disabilities.
- That the particular early intervention, support and housing needs of people from diverse communities are appropriately resourced and implemented within both the homelessness and mainstream service systems.

8) **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People**

Recommendations:
- That homelessness early intervention is established as a key measure across a range of government programs to minimise the number of Aboriginal people that become homeless.
- That funding is allocated to support or establish Aboriginal and specialist homelessness services to provide a culturally responsive service model to Aboriginal people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness across all client cohorts.

9) Measuring outcomes

Recommendations:
- That a homelessness outcomes framework is developed in partnership with the states and territories, aligned to an affordable housing outcomes framework. This will strengthen development of achievable outcomes across the housing and homelessness portfolios.
- That data collection systems are developed that enable evidence based outcomes to be captured and counted to inform homeless service system review and planning.
- That Homelessness Australia and the sector participate in the development of a realistic outcomes framework and implementation plan, utilising its knowledge of SHS and experience of the NPAH outcomes data collection to date.

10) Affordable housing supply

Recommendations:

- Develop an affordable housing strategy which includes:
    - Commitment to maintain and expand the National Affordable Housing Agreement to increase the supply of social and affordable housing in Australia, including increased Commonwealth and State commitment to and investment in social housing growth.
    - Reform of the negative gearing and capital gains tax treatment of rental housing to address the impact that this is having on housing affordability and the commitment of any revenue raised from this to be committed towards affordable housing.
    - Increased investment in and flexibility of Commonwealth Rental Assistance including maximum payment to 30% of income, indexed to the rental component of the Consumer Price Index and facility to vary the level of payment according to the average rental cost in each location.
    - An outcomes framework that is tied to a homelessness outcomes framework and enables measurement, analysis and adjustment of deliverables where required.

2   Lack of affordable housing and its link to increasing homelessness

The 2011 Census found that every night 105,000 Australians experience homelessness. [1]

Access to housing that is safe and affordable is the most critical factor in preventing and ending homelessness. Australia has a shortfall of over 500,000 rental dwellings that are affordable and available to households on the lowest 40% of incomes. As of June 2016, there were 194,592 applicants waiting for social housing across the country's social housing programs[2]. This includes public housing, State Owned and Managed Indigenous Housing and community housing. Across these three types of social housing, around 59,000 people were categorised as being in greatest need.

Australia is a country with an ageing population and has a retirement income system premised on outright home ownership. The proportion of households who own their home outright, is now smaller than the proportion who have a mortgage. As home ownership continues to diminish, the proportion of renters is also increasing. These trends signify a significant problem for our community[3].

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare data clearly shows that the numbers of people seeking assistance from Specialist Homelessness Services is increasing quite markedly. In 2012-13, Specialist Homelessness Services assisted 244,000 people. In 2015-16, this number has jumped to 279,000 people being assisted, an increase of 14% in the number of people assisted between the two collections.

Without access to enough social and affordable housing to meet demand, Specialist Homelessness Services struggle to provide the desired outcome of preventing or ending homelessness for people seeking assistance. In 2015-16 Specialist Homelessness Services were unable to provide assistance in 70,653 instances.

Housing supply and homelessness are clearly linked, and must be addressed in tandem if we are to effectively reduce the number of people who experience homelessness.

Further strengthening the collaboration and links between housing and homelessness programs is a critical factor if we are to address homelessness across Australia and successfully reduce the number of people in need.

Homelessness Australia calls on the Commonwealth Government to expand its commitment to support the homelessness service system, alongside investment in social and affordable housing.

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[1] ABS 2012. Census of population and housing: estimating homelessness, 2011. ABS cat no. 2049.0. Canberra: ABS

[2] http://www.aihw.gov.au/housing-assistance/haa/2016/priority-groups/

[3] An Affordable Housing Reform Agenda: Goals and recommendations for reform, 2015, ACOSS, Community Housing Federation of Australia, Homelessness Australia, National Association for Tenant's Organisations, National Shelter

3   The current commitment to addressing homelessness

The National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA) was established in 2009 and of its $1.3 billion commitment, $275 million is allocated for homelessness programs. This funding is an essential component of the homelessness service system and provides crisis accommodation for young people, women and children escaping domestic and family violence and rough sleepers. The NAHA is due to be reviewed in 2018.

The National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH) was established in 2009 as the national strategy agreement linked to the NAHA. The NPAH contributes to the NAHA outcome that 'people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness achieve sustainable housing and social inclusion'. It outlines the roles and responsibilities of the Australian Government and state and territory governments in relation to reducing and preventing homelessness.

Funding associated with the NPAH was initially provided for the four-year period 1 July 2009 - 30 June 2013. This has been followed with an interim funding arrangement agreed between the Australian and State and Territory governments for 2013–14 and 2014–15. In 2015–16, the Australian government committed further funding of $230 million over 2 years, under the NPAH, which was matched by states and territories. An interim funding arrangement for 2017/18 did provide indexation at CPI in that year, but was once again limited to one year's duration.

This failure to commit to an ongoing funding program has created a significant challenge for SHS as they strive to plan service innovation and maintain a workforce in an environment where they have not been able to guarantee job continuity.

In addition, a failure to link NPAH funding to any indexation until 2017/18 has seen the value of the funding reduce by close to $10 million since 2015.

4   What does the current commitment to addressing homelessness deliver?

Many Australians experience events in their lives that may place them at risk of homelessness. It is estimated that around 44% of low-income households experience affordability issues due to rental stress (paying more than 30% of their gross income on rent)[4], and around 1 in 4 women have experienced some form of domestic and family violence in their lifetime, putting them at risk of homelessness[5].

In 2015-16, Specialist Homelessness Services delivered the following across Australia[6]:

- 279,000 people were assisted by Specialist Homelessness Services. This is an increase of 23,000 people compared to 2014-15 (nine per cent growth over one year).
- 22 million days of support were delivered. This is an increase of 2 million days compared to 2014-15 (nine per cent growth over one year).
- Almost 7 million nights of accommodation were provided. This is an increase of 400,000 nights compared to 2014-15 (six per cent growth over one year).

The data collected provides a description of the issues addressed. In 2015-16:

- Six in ten clients were female
- One in four clients were Indigenous compared with just one in thirty-three in the general population
- Almost two in five clients sought assistance for domestic and family violence
- About one in ten clients had a disability and of these, over one third, or nearly 10,000 people, needed assistance with self-care, mobility and/or communication
- One in four clients, or 72,000 individuals receiving assistance from a Specialist Homelessness Service, were experiencing a current mental health issue
- 52% of young people presenting alone were homeless at the time they sought support
- 59 % or six in ten older clients lived alone prior to accessing Specialist Homelessness Services

On any given day across Australia, 1,460 Specialist Homelessness Services were supporting nearly 57,000 clients. Over 9,900 of these clients were young people presenting alone with more than 15,500 children presenting with their families. Almost 9,800 clients reported having slept rough in the last month, a 13% increase when compared to 2014-15.

Across the States and Territories, a dynamic mix of innovative service models are delivered with an aim of preventing homelessness where possible or ending homelessness as quickly as possible.

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[4] Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2013a. Housing and occupancy costs, 2011-12. ABS cat no. 4130.0. Canberra: ABS
[5] ABS 2013b. Personal safety, Australia, 2012. ABS cat. no. 4906.0. Canberra: ABS
[6] http://www.aihw.gov.au/homelessness/specialist-homelessness-services-2015-16/

5   What is needed to strengthen the response to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness?

5.1   Develop a national homelessness strategy that takes best practice to scale

The NPAH funding has allowed states and territories to develop and demonstrate effective practice models preventing and ending homelessness across the country. These include Housing First models, early intervention approaches to support young people at risk of homelessness, enhanced support for women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence and services that support people at risk of homelessness to maintain tenancies. These models and interventions now need to be securely funded and taken to scale. Homelessness Australia calls for the development of a National Homelessness Strategy that is resourced to implement best practice models across Australia as part of the core homelessness service system.

A National Homelessness Strategy must see resources committed to maintain and advance the development of the evidence base to support ongoing development of cost effective and responsive service models.

Recommendations:

- That the Commonwealth Government commit to a National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH), funded for five years, with funding linked to CPI increases. This will enable SHS to continue to deliver innovative and high quality services to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and with funding growth, enable the NPAH services to be provided across the service system.

- That the Commonwealth Government maintain the $275 million funding provided to homelessness services under the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA).

- That a National Homelessness Strategy is developed to drive NPAH and NAHA goals.

- That a homelessness research and evaluation agenda is resourced to continue to build the evidence base for high quality and effective responses to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

5.2   Build streamlined access

Experience tells us that access to housing and homelessness services depends in large part on where a person lives, and what services are locally available to a person who is experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Access pathways for clients must be strong, regardless of where they might present for assistance. This requires clear access points and a ''no wrong door' approach and mechanisms to streamline communication and client pathways, for example between federal programs such as Centrelink and state-based housing and homelessness programs.

This "potluck" approach to what assistance a person in need is offered, is most starkly evident in the responses offered to women escaping domestic and family violence. Depending on location, women might be offered a rental subsidy to enable them to maintain rental in the private rental market; access to a Safe at Home service response such as Staying Home Leaving Violence in NSW; or a

referral to a Specialist Homelessness Service crisis response with workers skilled in working with women experiencing domestic and family violence.

Recommendations

- Strengthen client service pathways to support people in need to access effective and evidence based service responses. Clear access points combined with a system wide ''no wrong door'' approach to the service system includes streamlined assessment processes.
- That State and Territory based human services outputs be framed to drive collaboration across programs and jurisdictions to strengthen client pathways to the most appropriate service response.

5.3   Housing First

Housing First is extraordinarily successful and well-evidenced. Finland is the only European country where homelessness has decreased in recent years. At the end of 2015 the number of single people experiencing homelessness in Finland, was for the first time under 7,000. This number includes people living temporarily with friends and relatives, who constitute 80% of all people experiencing homelessness. This development is mainly due to a national programme to reduce long-term homelessness, which adopted Housing First as the mainstream national homelessness policy. This program succeeded in halving long-term homelessness by 2011, and since then has continued to produce significant reductions in the number of people experiencing long-term homelessness. This common framework made it possible to establish a wide partnership of state authorities, local communities and non-governmental organisations. Cooperation and targeted measures in the implementation of the program led to the aforementioned results, which is backed-up by independent international evaluations[7].

Australian experience supports the effectiveness of a housing first model. Services working with families note the positive impact for family members with the delivery of housing as a first response to homelessness. Maintaining children in schooling to minimise disruption to their learning outcomes is a well-known factor that minimises welfare dependence in later life.

For families and individuals who are not entrenched in homeless or are at risk of homelessness, affordable housing and measures to alleviate poverty are the required responses.

For women and their children escaping domestic and family violence, access to housing that is secure, affordable and immediately available is the most critical factor in their support pathway.

Australia now also has substantial practice experience and evidence that confirms that the housing first model is also successful for people with complex needs. Permanent supportive housing models such as Common Ground, have been developed in South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory. We also have evidence of the success of the housing first model through leased properties, including a successful partnership established by a community housing provider and a Specialist Homelessness Service in the inner city of Sydney[8].

Experience in Australia has shown that a key component of a successful Housing First response for people with complex needs is the delivery of assertive and longer-term case management support.

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[7] https://www.theguardian.com/housing-network/2016/sep/14/lessons-from-finland-helping-homeless-housing-model-homes

[8] Bridge Housing delivers Platform 70 with Neami Way 2 Home. At September 2016, 80% of tenancies established had been sustained.

One example is the Michael Project, which described this approach as a consistent way of working with clients that emphasises active engagement, frequent contact and integrated, timely and appropriate support[9]. Case managers were often instrumental in establishing stability in the lives of clients, helping them to see the possibilities for improving their lives, and facilitating access to services once the client's interest has been engaged.

Service collaboration has been found to deliver effective services to homeless people with complex needs. An example of this can be seen in the Homeless Health Service (HHS) which is part of St Vincent's Hospital Sydney. HHS provides holistic healthcare, education and care coordination on an outreach basis to people who are experiencing homelessness in inner city Sydney and who are not currently accessing healthcare and support. Mackenzie et al have found that government funding could be packaged or pooled on the basis of cross-departmental funding of better integrated services for people experiencing homelessness with an efficiency dividend and the potential for greater effectiveness due to integration and improved case coordination[10].

Recommendations

- That Housing First underpins the homelessness response across Australia. This requires:
    - A supply of social housing to meet demand.
    - Housing First to be established as the foundation to allocation policy across social housing programs.
    - Support services resourced to provide the level of support required to assist individuals and families establish and maintain their tenancies.
    - Appropriate calibration of the model for different cohorts including rough sleepers, people leaving custody, people with complex needs, families and young people.
- That services are funded to continue housing support for as long as required to maximise success.
- Funding to provide appropriate packaged support for clients with complex needs.

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[9] Mission Australia 2012. The Michael Project, 2007-2010: New perspectives and possibilities for homeless men. Sydney: Mission Australia.

[10] MacKenzie, D., McNelis, S., Flatau, P., valentine, k. and Seivwright, A. (2017) *The funding and delivery of programs to reduce homelessness: the case study evidence*, AHURI Final Report No. 274, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, http://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/274, doi:10.18408/ahuri-5109201.

5.4   Rapid rehousing

Rapid rehousing is an essential response in supporting families, older people and women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence to obtain safe and affordable housing without having to spend long periods within crisis accommodation. It is particularly effective in supporting women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence.

Violence against women is now recognised to be a serious and widespread problem in Australia, with enormous individual and community impacts and social costs.

Violence against women and their children takes a profound and long-term toll on women and children's health and wellbeing, on families and communities, and on society as a whole. Intimate partner violence contributes to more death, disability and illness in women aged 15 to 44 than any other preventable risk factor[11].

Domestic or family violence against women is the single largest driver of homelessness for women. 106,000 people experiencing domestic and family violence sought assistance from homelessness agencies across Australia in 2015-16; 38% of all people requesting assistance from specialist homelessness agencies. Access to housing and support services at the time when a woman is able to act is a critical factor in her safety planning.

Rapid rehousing models provide access to assistance such as a government subsidy that provides short to medium term financial help to eligible clients leaving domestic and family violence so that they can secure private rental accommodation for themselves and their children. Access to financial assistance enables women to plan and act to establish secure housing when they might struggle to achieve this on their own.

Recommendations:

- That ongoing funding is allocated to enhance the delivery of Rapid Rehousing programs including to assist women and their children escaping domestic and family violence to establish secure housing.

5.5   Preventing tenancy breakdown

Specialist Homelessness Services have further developed and strengthened partnerships with social housing and the private rental market to engage early with tenants experiencing tenancy issues with a view to preventing homelessness from occurring.

To strengthen this response, an increase in funding allocated to Specialist Homelessness Services is required to enable more intensive and long term support to be offered to support tenants.

In addition, social housing providers must have homelessness early intervention as a key output measure, with monitoring of evictions into homelessness from that portfolio. Strong collaboration between social housing and Specialist Homelessness Services is a critical component of this outcome.

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[11] Based on Victorian figures from VicHealth (2004) The health costs of violence: Measuring the burden of disease caused by intimate partner violence, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne. A comparable national study is pending.

Recommendations

- Specific funding is allocated to Specialist Homelessness Services to strengthen support services to minimise tenancy failures in both private and social housing.
- An output measure is established to monitor evictions into homelessness from social housing providers.

5.6   Short and medium term accommodation

While a key foundation of Homelessness Australia's position is the need for an increased supply of social and affordable housing, there will always be a need for a supply of crisis and transitional accommodation options. However, these options must flow through to long term and permanent housing solutions. This blockage has a huge negative impact on the efficiency of Specialist Homelessness Services.

Some client cohorts who experience homelessness will always require access to a range of crisis and transitional housing support options on the way to permanent housing solutions.

Young people require access to a range of accommodation and support services as they grow and develop their skills to live independently. Across Australia, it is increasingly common for young people to be living at home as young adults as they struggle to afford private rental housing. Young people experiencing homelessness are even more disadvantaged as they lack access to family support and networks, compounding the need for crisis and transitional housing models.

Crisis services are also vital component of the service response for women and their children escaping domestic and family violence. In the past 3 years, community awareness of the unacceptability of domestic and family violence has seen a marked increase in women and children seeking assistance to leave violent homes. Short term crisis accommodation options are fundamental to supporting women and children to be safe from violence and needs to be funded to meet the service demand. In addition, some women, with or without accompanying children, who are survivors of domestic and family violence, would benefit from longer term stays in reasonably secure purpose built facilities.

Any ongoing support of crisis and transitional housing programs should support good practice in this area and ensure that accommodation is available in core and cluster configurations that enables independent living with a range of supports relevant to the needs of clients.

Recommendations.

- That the ongoing need for crisis and transitional housing programs is encompassed in a new homelessness strategy and funding model.
- That Specialist Homelessness Services are adequately resourced to provide crisis support to women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence, in line with the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children.

5.7   Deliver integrated services to prevent homelessness

How governments plan service investment and policy development is critical to preventing and ending homelessness. People becoming homeless can be considered the *"canary in the mine";* a sign that things are seriously wrong with our social policy settings. The Specialist Homelessness Service data provides some evidence of that system failure. In 2015-16, the data identified that:

- 38% of people seeking help were fleeing domestic and family violence
- 60% of clients identified housing affordability and financial difficulties as a reason for seeking assistance
- 24% of young people presenting alone sought assistance because of unstable housing
- More than 20% of clients identified mental health, medical issues or substance abuse as a reason for seeking Specialist Homelessness Services support
- 1 in 5 clients were older than 45 years

Services currently delivered through the NPAH have further strengthened and developed innovative service models in partnership with other human services to deliver integrated models of care. However, there is not enough focus given by government programs to undertake homelessness early intervention work across child protection, mental health, disability, aged care and housing supply portfolios.

Young people

Of those supported by our SHS in 2015-16, 122,158 or 44% were under the age of twenty five (AIHW). The flow of young people into homelessness can be dramatically reduced by ensuring that there are measures in place to address their needs at all crucial stages in their lives. Research and evidence from North America and Europe indicate that the best prevention and early intervention strategies take a holistic approach, focusing on both the personal and structural factors that contribute to a young person becoming homeless. In Australia since the mid 1990s, there has been a gradual shift towards prevention and early intervention to support young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.[12].

Early intervention services in particular are a key circuit breaker that prevent trajectories into entrenched homelessness by:

- Addressing family conflict and supporting families to stay together where it is safe to do so;
- Maintaining family connection, even if the young person can no longer reside at home;
- Stabilising all areas of a young person's life, including housing and connections to education, training and employment; and
- Equipping a young person with the supports and skills to avoid the limiting life outcome effects of homelessness, including involvement with the justice system, educational disengagement, ongoing health problems, young pregnancy and parenting and long-term welfare dependency.

Current approaches and systems mean that early intervention is not routinely offered to young people and families.

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[12] Gaetz, S. (2014). Coming of Age: Reimagining the Response to Youth Homelessness in Canada. Toronto: The Canadian Homelessness Research Network Press
http://www.homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/ComingOfAgeHH_0.pdf

In particular, Reconnect – the Federal Government's flagship youth homelessness early intervention initiative - does not have national coverage. The Reconnect program must provide comprehensive coverage in rural and urban areas, to allow all young Australians to have access to early intervention and support. Several components of Reconnect were identified as critical success factors in independent evaluations of the programs. Since 2006, these dimensions have been either diminished or removed. These include the role of Reconnect services in community capacity building around early intervention. These aspects of Reconnect, need to be restored.

It also needs to be acknowledged that not all young people are able to safely return to family due to violence, sexual assault and neglect and the homelessness service system needs to be resourced to provide crisis, support and other housing options where this is the case.

The transition of young people out of care, the youth justice system and the disability systems sees a disproportionately high and an increasing number, of young people at risk of and experiencing homelessness. The age at which young people leaving the care of the state to live independently, is not consistent with the access the overall youth population has to ongoing housing and support through their families. The Commonwealth Government identifies that young people reach independence at the age of 22 years through the criteria established for the Independence for Youth Allowance for example. Implicit in this definition is the support that young people continue to receive from their family past the age of 18 years. A shift is required within the housing and homelessness response that acknowledges the continued government support required for young people leaving state care, beyond the age of 18 years.

An example of tackling this issue successfully can be found in Ireland, where the evidence that the child protection system was failing many who were 'aging out' of care at 18 years old led to a new, robust 'aftercare guarantee' which is serving as a model for other countries in Europe[13]. Focus must be given to mechanisms to strengthen homeless prevention and early intervention outcomes for young people.

Mental health

Supporting people with complex needs is a challenging and important responsibility. There is a direct relationship between mental illness and homelessness/ insecure housing: mental illness is exacerbated by homelessness; the insecurity of housing is exacerbated by mental illness. Further, people are being discharged from psychiatric hospitals, other health services and institutions (such as prisons) without adequate arrangements for their housing as well as their treatment and support. Establishing a whole of government approach to early intervention, with clearly articulated responsibilities for government programs is critical.

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[13] Wayne Stanley, Aftercare Plans – a strong example from Ireland, FEANTSA Homelessness In Europe Journal, Spring 2016

Older people

Australia, like many countries is experiencing a serious demographic shift. The proportion of the population that is aged 65 years and older has increased substantially and is continuing to do so. It is doing so in the context of one of the most expensive housing markets in the world[14].

Current data suggests that an increasing proportion of Australians will be retiring or leaving the workforce as mortgage holders or private renters rather than outright home owners[15].

Understanding homelessness amongst older people requires a wide lens that encompasses older people who are experiencing homelessness now and those who are at risk of homelessness in the near future. Many of those at risk of homelessness are so primarily because of the lack of secure, affordable and appropriate rental housing for older people in many parts of Australia.

Addressing homelessness for this population group must have a twin focus. Firstly on those whose homelessness is associated with long-term major life difficulties such as chronic mental illness, cognitive impairment or substance abuse for example; and secondly on those whose homelessness is precipitated essentially by termination of a lease or by an unaffordable rent increase and who are unable to find alternative housing.[16]

Homeless older people face challenges that are very different from those experienced by younger adults or families. For seniors, the ravages of homelessness can accelerate and magnify the effects of ageing, including:

- Increased physical frailty
- Chronic disease
- Impaired mental function
- Loneliness and social isolation[17]

Any focus on older people at risk of or experiencing homelessness also needs to consider the added vulnerabilities for older women. Many older women at risk of or experiencing homelessness have higher levels of poverty due to lower incomes and lower levels of superannuation due to work histories that have been limited or interrupted because of caring responsibilities and may have been in long term abusive relationships.

People with a disability

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) is designed to support the aspirations of people with disability for independence and control over their lives. However, a major barrier to this independence is a shortfall of affordable housing dwellings, which are appropriate for and available to people with disabilities. Estimates of the scale of this shortfall vary, but a recent report by the Disability Housing Futures Working Group estimates that of the 110,000 people who will seek to move from their existing housing in the first 10 years of the operation of the NDIS, somewhere between 35,000 and 55,000 are likely to struggle to find appropriate affordable housing.

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[14] Cox, W., & Pavletich, H. (2016) *12th Annual Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey: 2015: Rating Middle Income Housing Affordability,* Wendell Cox Consultancy, Belleville IL, USA

[15] Jones, A., Bell, M., Tilse, C. & Earl, G (2007) *Rental housing provision for lower-income older Australians.* Final Report AHURI Melbourne

[16] Petersen, M. & Jones, A. June 2012, *Homelessness and older Australians: scoping the issues,* Institute of Social Science Research, University of Queensland

[17] http://www.hearth-home.org/media/hearth_research09.pdf

Along with these specific reforms, it will be important to promote and legislate the adoption of universal design standards in private market housing to ensure that mainstream housing is physically accessible to people with disabilities.

Of the 279,000 clients that accessed Specialist Homelessness Services in 2015-16, about one in ten clients had a disability and of these, over one third, or nearly 10,000 people, needed assistance with self-care, mobility and/or communication. Consideration needs to be given to how support mechanisms can be established for clients with disabilities who present to Specialist Homelessness Services that enable them to receive disability support services to prevent or end their homelessness as quickly as possible.

Diversity

People from diverse communities such as cultural and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities and Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex (LGBTQI) communities often face additional barriers to accessing emergency accommodation, long term housing and other support to resolve homelessness and may be at higher risk of homelessness because of a range of issues including discrimination. With few specialist providers of diverse support models in an over-stretched homeless service system, the homelessness of people from these groups often remains hidden.

For example, people from a CALD background may not be aware of support services that are available and homelessness services are not always able to provide culturally appropriate support such as translation services and bi-lingual staff. Refugees and asylum seekers face further complications related to legal and language barriers that make it difficult to work and to use social services, increasing their vulnerability to homelessness. Depending on which category of visa an asylum seeker or refugee holds, their visa conditions may mean they cannot legally work, access Centrelink, Medicare or government assistance to undertake education or training. This means that refugees and asylum seekers may be dependent on community support services, which are generally under-resourced. This is increasingly an issue for women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence, which places them at further risk of violence.

Currently SHS providers do not keep data on the numbers of LGBTIQ people accessing services. However, members of the LGBTIQ community are known to be at a higher risk of experiencing homelessness due to homophobia and potential lack of acceptance within family relationships. Anecdotal evidence also suggests members of the LGBTIQ community can experience direct discrimination within some services.

There needs to be a focus on addressing the additional barriers for diverse communities both within the homelessness service system and within the broader mainstream system.

Recommendations

- That homelessness early intervention activities with measurable targets be built into all government program reforms to establish responsibilities to undertake homelessness early intervention work within mental health, drug and alcohol, domestic and family violence, out of home care, and justice.
- That young people are identified as a key client cohort requiring investment to prevent and respond to homelessness, within a National Homelessness Strategy. The Strategy should set key targets and identify the resources required to integrate service delivery responses across child

protection, youth justice, disability and youth homeless service responses with a goal of ending youth homelessness.

- That Reconnect funding is increased and service delivery restored and provided across all high need areas in Australia;
- That older people are identified as a key client cohort, requiring investment to prevent and respond to homelessness within a National Homelessness Strategy. This should include the development of an integrated service model to drive coordination and collaboration between homelessness, housing and aged care health services to prevent homelessness and facilitate ageing in place prioritising the particular vulnerabilities of older women.
- That the Government engage with the National Disability Insurance Agency to develop strategies to intervene early and respond to homelessness effectively for its clients with a disability.
- Legislation adopts universal design standards to ensure that mainstream housing is physically accessible to people with disabilities.
- That the particular early intervention, support and housing needs of people from diverse communities are appropriately resourced and implemented within both the homelessness and mainstream service systems.

5.8   Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprise 25% of the 105,237 people counted as homeless across Australia on Census night 2011[18]. The over-representation of Aboriginal people in homelessness statistics is indicative of the system failure in addressing Aboriginal disadvantage. While all SHS are responsible for delivering a service response for Aboriginal people, it is understood that there needs to be specialist attention to the development and delivery of services delivered by Aboriginal people for Aboriginal people as well as to those of the specialist homelessness services.

Through a new homelessness strategy, consideration needs to be given to actions that will prevent homelessness occurring for Aboriginal people. These actions will require a concerted effort across a range of Federal, State and Territory programs beyond housing solutions, including strengthening mechanisms identified in Closing the Gap to address disadvantage. These include education, health, justice, the development of safe and healthy communities and employment opportunities.

Recommendations

- That homelessness early intervention is established as a key measure across a range of government programs to minimise the number of Aboriginal people that become homeless.
- That funding is allocated to support or establish Aboriginal and Specialist Homelessness Services to provide a culturally responsive service model to Aboriginal people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness across all client cohorts.

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[18] Census of Population and Housing: Estimating Homelessness, 2011 (cat. no. 2049.0)

6 Measuring outcomes

The NPAH established four outcomes as measures of program effectiveness. Two of those four outcomes related to access to housing, an issue beyond the influence of SHS, given the lack of social and affordable housing across Australia.

The development of a strong outcomes framework that develops measurable outcomes to support monitoring of program effectiveness is an essential component of any National Homelessness and Affordable Housing Strategy. This framework must be developed with a view to gradual implementation. It must integrate social and affordable housing and homelessness outcomes so that the key drivers that influence the numbers of people who are homeless is addressed more fully. Similarly, the State and Territory outputs that aim to drive a culture of integration and collaboration must be structured to ensure that meaningful and achievable outputs are developed across jurisdictions.

Recommendations

- That a homelessness outcomes framework is developed in partnership with the states and territories, aligned to an affordable housing outcomes framework. This will strengthen development of achievable outcomes across the housing and homelessness portfolios.
- That data collection systems are developed that enable evidence based outcomes to be captured and counted to inform homeless service system review and planning.
- That Homelessness Australia and the sector participate in the development of a realistic outcomes framework and implementation plan, utilising its knowledge of SHS and experience of the NPAH outcomes data collection to date.

7 Increase availability of affordable housing

To address the increasing number of people at risk of and experiencing homelessness, the Government must address the lack of affordable housing, increase social housing supply and implement measures to assist the retention of tenancies. Homelessness Australia estimates that an additional 250,000 social housing dwellings are needed nationally to address the current housing crisis.

One of the key priorities in addressing the lack of affordable housing must be to maintain and grow the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA). The NAHA aims to ensure that Australians have access to affordable, safe and sustainable housing that underpins social and economic participation. The NAHA is an agreement by the Council of Australian Governments that commenced on 1 January 2009, initiating a whole-of-government approach to tackling the problem of housing affordability. The NAHA provided $6.2 billion (now $1.343 billion pa 2016-17) worth of housing assistance to low and middle income Australians in the first five years. The Commonwealth Government needs to urgently develop an affordable housing strategy that focuses on increasing social housing, and improves affordability and access to the private rental market for people on low incomes and receiving income support. This strategy needs to include an outcomes framework that is tied to a homelessness outcomes framework and enables measurement, analysis and adjustment of deliverables where required.

In 2016, there were 409,932 social housing households across Australia[19]. The social housing available comprises the following number of dwellings by program:

Public Housing	320,014
State Owned & Managed Indigenous Housing	9,949
Mainstream Community Housing	80,225
Indigenous Community Housing	15,634
Northern Territory Remote Community Housing	5,064
Total	**430,886**

The NAHA underpins Australia's specialist homelessness and social housing responses and needs to continue and grow in order to address Australia's current affordable housing challenge.

In addition, significant tax reform needs to occur to address the current inequities in the housing market. Rental housing currently receives tax subsidies in the form of investors being able to write off losses from rental investments against other income, and significantly reduced capital gains tax compared to other investments. These tax settings have a number of negative consequences for housing, including:

- Encouraging speculative investment in loss-making assets, driving up housing prices across the market
- Making rental housing unattractive to institutional investors such as superannuation funds as these are unable to take advantage of the negative gearing opportunities

Finally, the current level of Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) is inadequate with 40% of recipients still in housing stress after receiving the payment. Its real value has declined over time as rents have risen faster than inflation.

Recommendations:

- Develop an affordable housing strategy which includes:
  - Commitment to maintain and expand the National Affordable Housing Agreement to increase the supply of social and affordable housing in Australia, including increased Commonwealth and State commitment to and investment in social housing growth.
  - Commonwealth and State commitment to no exits from social housing into homelessness.
  - Reform of the negative gearing and capital gains tax treatment of rental housing to address the impact that this is having on housing affordability and the commitment of any revenue raised from this to be committed towards affordable housing.
  - Increased investment in and flexibility of Commonwealth Rental Assistance including maximum payment to 30% of income, indexed to the rental component of the Consumer Price Index and facility to vary the level of payment according to the average rental cost in each location.
  - An outcomes framework that is tied to a homelessness outcomes framework and enables measurement, analysis and adjustment of deliverables where required.

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[19] http://www.aihw.gov.au/housing-assistance/haa/2016/data/