

Increasing pressure on Tasmania's Homelessness Services – New AIHW Report

Friday 11th December 2020

“Today sees the release of yet another report showing evidence of pressures on the homelessness sector arising from our chronic shortage of affordable rental housing across the state,” Pattie Chugg, CEO of Shelter Tas, the peak body for housing and homelessness said.

The report from Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) is available at <https://pp.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-annual-report/fact-sheets-by-state-and-territory>

“Every year, the AIHW delivers a report that summarises data from Specialist Homelessness Services, including the services that people have requested, the characteristics of clients and the unmet requests for services and support. The report released today shows in FY 2019-20, each day in Tasmania, 36 people requesting assistance from Homelessness Services could not be assisted. In other words, people asked for help, but could not be accommodated. This number has increased up from 31 unassisted requests last year, and 27 the previous year, a jump of 33% in just two years,” Ms Chugg said.

“This report also shows that in 2019-20 the proportion of clients needing accommodation in Tasmania was much greater than nationally (92% and 59%, respectively). This reflects the competitive and expensive state of our private rental market, where Tasmanian incomes are failing to keep pace with soaring rental prices, and even households on moderate incomes are paying over 30% of their income in rent,” Ms Chugg said.

The top reasons for Tasmanians to be seeking assistance were:

- housing crisis (50%, compared with 34% nationally)
- financial difficulties (45%, compared with 41%)
- housing affordability stress (44% compared with 29%).

“It is important to recognise that Tasmania’s 50 specialist homelessness services assisted 6,400 clients, and significant efforts are being made to improve the supply of affordable rental housing in Tasmania. However, the pressures of increased demand for housing, rising rental prices combined with low and precarious incomes mean that too many people are missing out on the housing they urgently need. We know that the economic impacts of COVID-19 mean increasing housing hardship and placing more Tasmanians at risk of homelessness,” Ms Chugg said.

“In Tasmania’s competitive and unaffordable rental market, many low income earners must make impossible choices between essentials such as food and heating or having a home. Single parent working families, Newstart recipients, young people and aged and disability pensioners are the worst affected, along with many households who have lost income due to the Covid-19 pandemic effects on the Tasmanian economy.

“People may not realise that homelessness affects people of all ages. People aged 55 and over are 12% of people seeking help for crisis housing, that is more than one in ten. This report shows that nearly three in five clients – 57% - were homeless on first presentation. In addition, far too many Tasmanian children are experiencing homelessness. On any given day in Tasmania, there are 203 children aged 0-17 years in families being supported by specialist homelessness services, and 499 young people aged 15-24 presenting alone. Across the year, young people aged 15-24 presenting alone made up more than one quarter – 27.4% – of Tasmanians seeking assistance, which is much higher than the national level of 17%,” Ms Chugg said.

“Homelessness is far more common than people think. Of the 1600 people counted in the 2016 Census, only 8% were sleeping rough. We need to consider the remaining 92% of people who are unseen and rarely thought about, who are in insecure, temporary, overcrowded and unsafe places. This can mean people sleeping in their car, staying on couches or floors, or staying in motels or other short-term accommodation. Our members are reporting that across the State, rising rent and low income growth is creating unprecedented hardship for many people seeking to find an affordable home,” Ms Chugg said.

“More than half the people seeking help from homelessness services are women, 56%, and our member services report a substantial increase in the number of older women seeking help. Homelessness can be unexpected. For example, think about what happened to an older renter we will call Dorothy. Her husband died, and she couldn’t keep up with the rent on a single income. Then Dorothy couldn’t find anywhere affordable to rent, so she was sleeping in other people’s houses, on floors and couches. Mostly she only had a few nights before people asked her to leave, so she had to find somewhere else to go. Sometimes, Dorothy was desperate enough to sleep in her car. Dorothy finally found a place in community housing where she can feel safe, and pay a rent she can afford. Tasmania needs to build more affordable rental homes for people like Dorothy.”

“Tasmania needs a Housing First approach, because without a home, everything else falls apart. We need enough affordable housing to ensure that episodes of homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurring. Shelter Tas supports the state government’s initiatives to increase supply of social housing, and increase the capacity of the Specialist Homelessness Services sector. In particular, we strongly support the additional \$100 M announced this year to build more affordable homes, the Community Housing Growth Program, the Tasmanian Affordable Housing Strategy and associated Action Plans. Given the evidence of increasing need, Shelter Tas and our members call for an additional boost to the construction of social housing, from the current level of just over 5% of dwellings, to achieve a target of 10% of all dwellings to be community housing and social rentals, which will stay affordable in the long term,” Ms Chugg said.

About Shelter Tasmania:

Shelter Tasmania is the peak body for housing and homelessness.

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