



IT'S TIME TO END
HOMELESSNESS

Mental Health Royal Commission Establishment
Department of Premier and Cabinet
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To the Royal Commission,

I write to you on behalf of Launch Housing to highlight the critical importance of stable housing in preventing mental health issues. Homelessness can have a devastating effect on mental health and wellbeing.

Drawing from our extensive practice experience and insights from a survey conducted with our internal stakeholders (including our Lived Experience Advisory Group), I strongly recommend that the following four issues are included in the Terms of Reference for the Royal Commission into Mental Health:

1. Placing safe, secure and appropriate housing at the centre of prevention and recovery.
2. Recognising and privileging the experience, expertise and voice of consumers.
3. Enhancing prevention and early intervention approaches and improving pathways to mental health services.
4. Prioritising the specific issues of high needs groups in Victoria.

About Launch Housing

Launch Housing is an independent Melbourne-based community organisation working with people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. We are one of Victoria's largest providers of housing and homelessness support services. We provide flexible, specialist services that directly assist thousands of individuals, couples and families every year. Last year we supported 18,000 people at risk of or experiencing homelessness across Melbourne.

Launch Housing is Victoria's strongest advocate for affordable housing and is a national leader of research into homelessness that produces better outcomes for our clients and lasting positive change for our community. We believe housing is a basic human right that affords people dignity, and this is reflected throughout every aspect of our work. Everyone has a right to a home and it is our job to make this happen. Our mission is to end homelessness.

From hospitals to real estate agents, police to schools, we work with a wide section of the Victoria community to help people get and keep housing. We are dedicated to encouraging communities and decision-makers to change the systemic circumstances that contribute to homelessness.

Homelessness

Often when thinking about homelessness, the stereotype image that comes to mind is that of someone sleeping rough. This is certainly one aspect of homelessness but it is the minority experience. Homelessness also includes: people using supported accommodation such as crisis accommodation (provided by agencies like Launch Housing); people staying temporarily with other households; people living in boarding houses and other temporary lodgings; and, people living in 'severely' crowded dwellings.

Importantly, homelessness is not just about a lack of shelter. At Launch Housing we believe strongly that homelessness is about the loss of *home* and all the elements that are central to what a home provides: privacy, security, warmth, connection and belonging.

The 2016 Census estimated that more than 116,400 people, including children and young people, experience homelessness on any given night across Australia. In Victoria, that figure is close to 25,000 people. As highlighted in the inaugural *Australian Homelessness Monitor* (commissioned by Launch Housing) the changing level of homelessness is an outcome of socio-economic and housing market trends that influence the numbers of people liable to become homeless, and which also affect the capacity for those in this situation to regain suitable accommodation.

The demand for homelessness services in Victoria increased by 28% from 2011 to 2016. The co-occurrence of mental health is ever-present for people either at risk of or experiencing homelessness. Over 30% of Launch Housing clients present with a mental health issue and we estimate that the true extent is much higher. The considerable stress and trauma of homelessness itself also contributes to poor mental health.

Survey of stakeholders

This submission draws on a survey of Launch Housing's key internal stakeholders that we conducted in early January 2019. It is also informed by our broader understanding about housing, homelessness and mental health, and the importance of consumer participation and voice.

There are four issues that need to inform the scope of work and deliberations of the Royal Commission.

Issue 1: Placing safe, secure and appropriate housing at the centre of prevention and recovery

A key feature of the prevention and early intervention of mental health issues is housing.

Safe, secure and appropriate housing is a fundamental prerequisite to engaging in society and directly contributes to overall health and wellbeing. Unfortunately, we know that the absence of good housing can have a detrimental effect on health, particularly mental health. There is a 'health gradient' whereby the health and wellbeing of a community (including its mental health) is greatly shaped by the amount and quality of housing.

Our survey of Launch Housing's internal stakeholders frequently identified the absence of housing and the experience of homelessness as matters for consideration by the Royal Commission. For example, respondents expressed concern about how the lack of housing contributes to mental health deterioration. Without housing, people who are mentally unwell are at a higher risk of cycling through acute mental health care and exiting to homelessness, only to return repeatedly to hospital-based care, and/or being accommodated in prisons.

There is extensive research literature about the adverse effect of homelessness on mental health and wellbeing, and the co-presence of mental health issues for many people experiencing homelessness.

Housing, along with appropriate supports, is also central to recovery. Secure tenure, with the right support services in place, allows people to focus on mental health treatment and rehabilitation. This is readily evident with Permanent Supportive Housing models that provide an effective approach to the immediate housing and support needs for people with a mental health issue who are experiencing homelessness.

Recommendation

That the Royal Commission:

- Review the available evidence on the preventive role of safe, secure and appropriate housing in preventing mental health issues.
- Revisit the available evidence about the co-occurrence of mental health issues for people either at risk of or experiencing homelessness, and the devastating effects of homelessness on mental health.
- Examine housing and support options available to people with mental health issues and their integration with the current mental health system as an extended system response.

- Investigate the wider application of housing and support models such as Permanent Supportive Housing to assist in recovery.
- Encourage the State Government to adopt a common policy response across housing, homelessness and mental health portfolios, which is critical to achieve better health, social and economic outcomes for people with a mental health issue.

Issue 2: Recognising and privileging the experience, expertise and voice of consumers

Ultimately the Royal Commission is about improving the life chances and wellbeing of Victorians experiencing a mental health issue. Service systems and institutions should be judged by the experience and expertise of consumers. This includes an assessment of the current state of mental health provision in Victoria and the role of consumer-informed practices to assist with the co-design of services.

Consumer participation is a strongly held principle for Launch Housing as expressed by our Lived Experience Advisory Group (LEAG). The LEAG is a group of 12 consumers with a lived experience of homelessness. The group has representation of people from diverse backgrounds and experiences including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, the trans and gender diverse community, parents, young people and older people.

Comments from our internal survey noted the need to account for the lived reality of people experiencing homelessness who use mental health services. Some pointed out that the homeless community should be consulted regarding access to mental health services including discharge from hospital and how mental health orders are enacted. Similarly, respondents indicated that the Royal Commission must be driven by consumers so that their experiences are given voice. As one respondent stated: "it is essential that their perspective and experiences are placed at the centre of the work of the Commission. This will be the only way to achieve true empowerment and consciousness-raising, and will be the most effective way to identify systemic deficiencies within the mental health sector..."

Launch Housing will work with the LEAG to help engage and support consumers who wish to provide evidence to the Royal Commission. We strongly encourage the Royal Commission to ensure consumers are supported to tell their story in a safe environment. As highlighted in our survey, this should include the provision of counselling support for those who are giving evidence.

Recommendation

That the Royal Commission:

- Ensure the experience, expertise and voice of current and former mental health consumers are central to the Commission's deliberations and recommendations.
- Provide a safe and supportive environment so that consumers are supported to tell their story without fear and stigma.
- Fund community agencies in order to support and assist consumers to actively engage with the Royal Commission.

Issue 3: Enhancing prevention and early intervention approaches and improving pathways to mental health service

It is well recognised that the establishment and maintenance of prevention and early intervention programs are a necessary feature of a balanced approach to mental health. While there remains a valuable role for the tertiary treatment of people with mental health issues, we know that mental health outcomes are improved through effective prevention and early intervention.

Prevention and early intervention programs for mental health was nominated by our internal stakeholders as a priority issue. Respondents argued that more money needs to be invested into community work, work

in schools and with families to develop healthy lifestyles for children and young people. For example, our Education Pathways Program provides active support to enable parents and children experiencing homelessness to re-engage with a school community and provide much needed stability and security.

Crucial to the early intervention is our ability to secure in a timely manner mental health assessments and other clinical health interventions for people rough sleeping and those who are 'hard to reach'. Due to the highly skilled relations that our practitioners have with consumers, it is preferable that mental health resources sit with specialist homelessness support services, like Launch Housing, to ensure the effective targeting of assistance.

Accessibility and navigating the mental health system were also nominated by our internal stakeholders as an important issue. Launch Housing works intensely with all aspects of the mental health service system including the acute sector and community mental health providers. We have formal partnerships and MOUs with the four major clinical mental health providers - Alfred Health, St Vincent's Hospital, the Inner West Area Mental Health Services and Monash Health.

Launch Housing also works intensely with these clinic providers. For example, we have practitioners working on the acute wards of the Alfred and St Vincent's, and with the Inner West outreach team. Similarly, we work closely with a range of providers such as NEAMI who are providers of community-based mental health and homelessness services. Support is provided to improve client wellbeing and to live independently using a targeted wrap-around approach for someone sleeping rough.

It is imperative that there is increased and sustained funding for community-based and acute mental health services to meet demand and to ensure ready access for people experiencing homelessness. This must be matched by improvements in service collaboration and integration. Comments from our survey highlighted the need for improved interactions between mental health services with other related services such as specialist homelessness services, alcohol and drug programs, corrections and police.

A range of specific service issues were also identified. For example, there is a pressing need for sub-acute support for people not 'at risk enough' for hospital admission but still requiring immediate support when presenting as suicidal. Our internal stakeholders also raised concerns about the eligibility and access to the NDIS by people with a mental health issue. As one respondent noted, the "NDIS is not working as it should in supporting mental health clients."

But of course, improvements in the funding and integration of community-based and acute mental health services will be ineffective without access to safe, secure, and appropriate long-term housing.

Recommendation

That the Royal Commission:

- Highlight the considerable benefits of prevention and early intervention programs and the need for additional resources to support successful intervention.
- Examine the critical role of safe, secure and appropriate housing in preventing mental health issues.
- Highlight the current inadequacies, from the lived experience of consumers, in accessing and navigating the mental health system.
- Explore the option of targeting mental health resources to specialist homelessness support services who are better placed to engage with people experiencing homelessness including people sleeping rough.
- Identify gaps and recommend urgent improvement to ensure clearer referral pathways and better integration between acute and community mental health services, hospitals, and alcohol and drug services.
- Review the effect of the NDIS on community mental health services in Victoria and identify eligibility and access of the NDIS for people with a psychosocial disability.

Issue 4: Prioritising the specific issues for high needs groups in Victoria

Whilst a general response to the mental health and wellbeing of all Victorians is warranted, specific attention should be on particular high needs groups. There is an ethical obligation upon government and providers to ensure that the mental health system supports those most in highest need including people experiencing homelessness. Our internal survey also identified a number of priority groups with particular needs such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and LGBTIQ people, both of whom are over-represented in homeless services and have higher rates of suicide.

Recommendation

That the Royal Commission:

- Ensures acute and community-based mental health services are designed to meet the needs of, and are readily available for, people experiencing homelessness.
- Recognise the specific circumstances and requirements of high need groups including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and LGBTIQ people and ensure any recommendations are culturally appropriate.

Summary

On behalf of Launch Housing, I look forward to the deliberations of the Commission and trust the four issues in our submission are included in the Terms of Reference for the Royal Commission.

We urge the Commissioners to look frankly at the current state of the mental health experience for Victorians experiencing homelessness and those precariously housed.

We concur with our peak bodies, the Community Housing Industry Association Victoria (CHIA Vic) and the Council to Homeless Persons (CHP), that access to secure, affordable and appropriate housing is a critical precondition to good mental health and is a social determinant of health and wellbeing. Appropriate housing also provides a safe place for people to pursue treatment, mental health management and/or recovery. As one of the survey respondents noted, “housing and homelessness services are important for mental health recovery”.

Without focusing in the importance of housing and the devastating effects of homelessness, it will not be possible for the Royal Commission to understand the gaps and failings of the current mental health system, nor fully appreciate the lived experiences of people with mental health issues struggling to navigate the current system.

I am heartened by the important and welcome announcement by the Premier that all of the recommendations of the Royal Commission will be adopted. As noted by many of our internal stakeholders it is important the Royal Commission leads to practical and implementable outcomes by the State Government. As one of our survey respondents put it: “it would be nice to have some actual positive outcomes rather than just another report that never gets acted on.”

I concur.

It is time for action about mental health in Victoria especially for those experiencing homelessness.

Yours sincerely



Bevan Warner
Chief Executive Officer