

A zero tolerance for homelessness

Responding to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Homelessness

This written submission follows from and builds upon the evidence provided to the Legal and Social Issues Committee by Bevan Warner, Chief Executive Officer and Karren Walker, Manager Entry Points, on 22 November 2019.

Summary

The persistence and continued growth of homelessness is unacceptable and unforgivable but it is eminently solvable, given the right policies, programs and attendant political leadership to make this happen.

Launch Housing commends the work of the Legal and Social Issues Committee and recommends the following:

- There is an urgent need to invest in social housing – shamefully Victoria has the lowest level of public and community housing stock in Australia (3.5%). We can't end homelessness without more homes.
- More and better assistance is needed for people to sustain a rental tenancy - be it private or public - and prevent the spiral into homelessness.
- Better discharge from hospitals and other institutions - it beggars belief that someone is discharged from hospital back to homelessness. This is a sign of systems failure that could easily be measured and reported on, just like we recount the road toll on nightly news bulletins.
- An improved response for crisis accommodation - purchasing beds from sub-standard private hotels and motels with poor amenities is unsafe, expensive, and further traumatises very vulnerable families and individuals
- Increase the supply of Housing First or Permanent Supportive Housing; where services are insourced to residents, needing ongoing support to maintain a safe tenancy. It is cheaper than treating street homelessness. It is the correct economic and moral course to pursue.
- Double down and expand the provision of Education First Youth Foyers to provide proven pathways to vulnerable young people back into education and employment as a basis for a rich and productive life.

Launch Housing

Launch Housing is an independent Melbourne-based community organisation working with people at risk of or experiencing homelessness. We believe housing is a basic human right that affords people dignity, and it is our job to make this happen. Our mission is to end homelessness. We provide flexible, specialist services that directly assist thousands of individuals, couples and families every year. For more information about Launch Housing see *Attachment A*.

Changes in the scale and nature of homelessness in Victoria

Term of Reference 1: Provide an independent analysis of the changing scale and nature of homelessness across Victoria

Homelessness takes many forms - ranging from rough sleeping (literal homelessness) to living in conditions of severe overcrowding. For a general overview see *Attachment B*.

The overall level of homelessness has continued to grow.

For Launch Housing, we saw more than 16,000 clients in 2018-19: a 4% increase from the previous yearⁱ. In particular, rough sleeping and other forms of homelessness remain a persistent problem for the inner municipalities of Melbourne. For example, we conservatively estimate that the level of service demand for crisis accommodation in Inner Melbourne (the local government areas of Melbourne; Maribyrnong; Port Phillip; Stonington and Yarra) is approximately 2,000 people, over a full year.

The face of homelessness is increasingly an older woman, a family and a child and it is someone who is working. For example, among women aged 55 and over, the level of homelessness increased by 31% since 2011.ⁱⁱ

Family violence contributes to homelessness especially for women leaving a violent partner and usually means fleeing to crisis services because there is nowhere to go. Data show that Victorian Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS), such as Launch Housing, provided assistance to 50,823 family violence clients in 2018-19. This figure represents 45% of the total 112,900 clients assisted in Victoria.ⁱⁱⁱ Since 2011, the numbers of family violence clients steadily increased; but from 2017-18 to 2018-19, there was a 10% decrease in this client group, mostly due to changes by some family violence agencies in how they recorded clients.¹

Despite the pressing need for housing and support for women (and children) experiencing family violence, the service system can compound rather than actively support their circumstances.

For example, it is the experience of Launch Housing that in some cases, family violence survivors have not been able to access crisis accommodation if they have not terminated a current public or community housing tenancy. This, unintended consequence, potentially forces women to remain in a dangerous situation rather than access a safe alternate option.

A recent study^{iv} has highlighted the risk of homelessness for return veterans. Fully 5.3% of recently veterans leaving the Australian Defence Force (ADF) were experiencing homeless in a 12-month period - a level significantly higher than for the general population (1.9%). Over a 12-month period approximately 5,767 veterans nationally were experiencing homelessness, which translates into about 1,440 in Victoria - a sizeable but also a solvable group.

Homelessness continues to be an Indigenous Victorian too. For example, 9,837 Victorians seeking assistance from SHS agencies in 2018-19 were Indigenous.^v This is an increase of 22% in the three years to 2019. The experience of homelessness for Indigenous Victorians compounds other disadvantages and exposes people to negative interactions with other services such as justice.

As Launch Housing recently discussed with the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, homelessness is a reality for many who experience mental ill health and who, due to their psychosocial disability, have a higher risk of living in precarious housing and homelessness. The presence of mental health or psychosocial disability elevates this risk.^{vi} Over a two-week period in 2019, a census of Launch Housing clients revealed that nearly half (44%) had a current mental health

¹ The AIHW also note: *'In addition, during 2018-19, a phased process to shift family violence intake to non-SHS services began, which may result in an overall decrease in the number of SHS family violence clients over the coming years. Caution should be used when comparing Victorian client numbers over recent years'*. See: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/shs-annual-report-18-19/contents/client-groups-of-interest/clients-who-have-experienced-family-and-domestic-violence>

issue. Younger people (57.1% of SHSC clients in 2018-19 are under the age of 35) and women (61% of SHS clients in 2018-19)^{vii} are also over represented in people seeking assistance from Specialist Homelessness Services.

More information about addressing mental health and homelessness, and Launch Housing's expectations of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, is in *Attachment C*.

For some (fortunately), experiencing homelessness only occurs once and for a shorter time. For example, almost three quarters (71.6 %) of people who had experienced homelessness in the past ten years were homeless for less than 6 months, while 57% were homeless for 3 months or less^{viii}. But for others, homelessness is persistent, chronic and can reoccur throughout someone's life.

Homelessness does not discriminate by place or suburb. It is visible in the inner city and is also a growing presence in our suburbs and regions. For example - Inner Melbourne has a homelessness rate of 83.8 people experiencing homelessness per 10,000 persons (largely rough sleeping) compared with Dandenong with 97 people experiencing homelessness per 10,000 persons (mainly severe overcrowding). Generally, the geography of homelessness is changing^{ix}. While homelessness remains moderately spatially concentrated, it is slowly becoming more dispersed over time to suburban areas. Homelessness is especially rising in areas with a shortage of affordable private rental housing and higher median rents

Despite what aspect of homelessness we may wish to emphasise, its existence and persistence in Victorian communities is not an accident, a quirk of fate, someone's bad choices or just a sad fact of life.

Factors that impact on homelessness

Term of Reference 2: Investigate the many social, economic and policy factors that impact on homelessness

Homelessness has its roots in a flawed housing market and inadequate incomes.

As a community, we prioritise property price speculation as a means to private wealth creation; through people owning more than one home, ahead of our fellow citizens' basic needs. We are stretching inequality further and this will be a threat to social cohesion and a problem handballed to future generations.

This housing system crisis has been unfolding for 30 years and we need to act now to reverse it. As highlighted in Launch Housing's Australian Homelessness Monitor^x, a strong contributing cause of homelessness is the persistence of crushing poverty. This, for example, is reflected in the inadequacy of NewStart payments with the majority of Launch Housing clients hardly surviving on a Centrelink payment. A recent review of our client records for the past three years showed that 42% of people presenting at our three entry points (which provide Initial Assistance and Planning for people in a housing crisis) were receiving NewStart. This highlights the high level of housing stress and the heightened risk of homelessness faced by recipients of income support.

Homelessness is also the failure of multiple service systems - housing, justice, hospitals and mental health, for instance – to provide the shared support and housing needed. For many people, this means frequently cycling through acute mental health care and exit to homelessness, only to return repeatedly to hospital-based care, and the prison system. For example, more than 500 people being discharged from acute mental health care into rooming houses, motels and other homeless situations each year^{xi}. It is totally unacceptable that someone is discharged from hospital back to homelessness.

Accordingly, Launch Housing supports the recommendation by the Productivity Commission^{xii} that: “State and Territory Governments should commit to a formal policy of no exits into homelessness for people discharged from institutional care.” However, this is cheap rhetoric without more homes to send people to.

Fundamentally, homelessness is a lack of affordable housing. Shamefully, Victoria (3.5%) has the lowest level of public and community housing stock in Australia well below the national average of 4.5%. There is a shortfall of 102,800 social housing properties in Victoria^{xiii} with 41,677 households on a waitlist for social housing properties^{xiv}.

There is also the depressing lack of affordable private rentals in metropolitan Melbourne, affordable new lettings had fallen to just 4.9% in the 2019 March quarter, compared with 5.4% in the 2018 December quarter^{xv}. The situation for people receiving NewStart Allowance – which will be the main income support for many people in our target cohort – was that only 0.3% of one-bedroom dwellings were affordable in metropolitan Melbourne.^{xvi} Additionally, there is the permanent crisis of housing endured by many Victorians – such as the poor-quality rental, the exploitative rooming house and the ever-present threat of a notice to vacate.

And it is the lack of crisis beds. Many people who seek assistance when in crisis are turned away without being assisted. The Victoria SHSC figures for 2018-19 suggest that on average there were 104.5 unassisted requests per day, of these 47.4 requests (45.4% of all unassisted requests) were for short term or emergency accommodation^{xvii}. Churning, or repeat presentations for assistance without long-term resolution of homelessness, is also common. One analysis by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reports more than half of clients using short term/emergency accommodation return repeatedly to SHS’s over subsequent years for assistance.^{xviii} In any other service system, ‘churn’ like this would attract an intervention and wholesale redesign of that system.

More often than not a crisis response is a sub-standard hotel or motel room purchased at high cost to taxpayers. Purchased crisis accommodation options are typically privately-run rooming houses and motels that are unsafe, expensive, and have poor amenity. They are over-subscribed, difficult to access, and are used mainly by people with high support requirements and histories of trauma.

We estimate that across inner Melbourne, during the last financial year, 3,720 people were placed in purchased crisis accommodation through one of the six access points in inner Melbourne. This is around three times the number of people using formal crisis accommodation services. This is a conservative estimate with other research suggesting a higher ratio.

The consequences for those experiencing homelessness are devastating. It not only damages people’s spirit and sense of hope but it literally harms their health. This is evident for those fellow Victorians who experience increased morbidity and chronic health problems. It also results in premature and preventable deaths. For the 12-month period up to December 2019, we were aware of 79 known deaths of people who were a current or former clients with Launch Housing – likely a large undercount and we suspect the true level of premature deaths for people experiencing homelessness is much higher. More information about the high levels of morbidity and mortality for people with an experience of homelessness is provided in *Attachment D*.

Policies and practices needed to address homelessness

Terms of Reference 3: Identify policies and practices from all levels of government that have a bearing on delivering services to the homeless.

Compassion is cheap if it does not address the systemic causes of homelessness and makes the investments needed in housing and support programs. This is fundamentally a question of priority and politics. Solutions to homelessness are known, 'doable' and practical – but we need to scale these up and hold the course.

At its core, all solutions rely on an increased investment in and supply of social and affordable housing. This is the 'golden thread' common to all programs and policies. For example, you cannot have better discharge plans in place for hospitals if there are no homes to go to.

There is an urgent need to invest adequately in social housing. Victoria spends^{xix} less than half the amount per head of population on social housing (\$82.94 per person) as the national average (\$166.93 per person). We support calls^{xx} to the Victorian government to fund an additional 3000 social housing properties and 3000 affordable housing properties for the next 10 years.

Solutions to homelessness also include the timely assistance to sustain a rental tenancy and preventing the catastrophic spiral into homelessness. For example, 65% of the more than 101,400 clients who accessed support from Victoria's specialist homelessness services in the last financial year had housing but were *at risk* of losing their tenancy on first presentation^{xxi}. Intervening early is about stabilising an existing tenancy and is a key mechanism to respond to a housing crisis and prevent homelessness.

Critically, solutions to homelessness also mean working together with local government, developers and the community to increase the supply of housing in each neighbourhood, in each municipality and in each region. For example, there is a need to socialise private profits via inclusionary zoning to increase rental stock for people on low incomes that they can afford to rent.

Inclusionary zoning is a land use planning intervention by government that either mandates or creates incentives so that a proportion of a residential development includes a number of affordable housing dwellings. South Australia and New South Wales both provide examples of successful inclusionary zoning policies within Australia that have delivered over 4000 and 500 units of affordable housing respectively^{xxii}. In South Australia, around 17% of total dwelling approvals within major new residential development areas (2005-15) include dedicated affordable homes.

From our extensive practice experience there are also a number of scalable solutions for the Parliamentary Committee to consider.

For example, our Education First Youth Foyers that divert young people from homelessness and improve their education. Education First Youth Foyers are an innovative response to helping young people who want to study but cannot live at home. The Foyer is an integrated learning and accommodation centre that aims to develop the skills of young people by providing accommodation, education, training, employment and support.

A recent evaluation^{xxiii} highlighted positive education and training outcomes as well as a six-fold increase in independent living, by the end of the supported tenancy. For example, the education and training outcomes for young people were positive - at entry, only 42% of young people had completed Year 12 or Certificate III or higher; this increased to 67% at exit. Housing outcomes for participants of the Foyer also improved, at entry, only 7% of young people were living in their own place; this increased to 43% at exit.

Solutions to homelessness also require an expansion in Housing First or Permanent Supportive Housing that finally provides the housing security and support services to allow people to start their recovery from mental ill health. Permanent supportive housing ensures the provision of ongoing,

long-term housing coupled with supportive services for individuals and families experiencing chronic homelessness. Further information about the key features of Permanent Supportive Housing is provided in *Attachment E*.

And with this form of supportive housing there are real cost savings to governments. It is cheaper to house someone in supported housing than to keep them in the homelessness service system, bouncing between hospitals and the justice system. For example, a 2015 evaluation of Brisbane Common Ground found that the supported housing model cost \$14,329 per tenant per annum, compared to the \$27,429 annual cost of health, criminal justice and homelessness services used in the 12 months prior to the supported tenancy starting. It represents an annual saving of \$13,100 for each person accommodated.^{xxiv}

Solutions to homelessness also require the provision of supports for parents and children to attend school and reconnect with a local community. This is highlighted in the success of our Education Pathways Program that saw the vast majority of young students re-enrolled at school. This program is fully funded by philanthropy.

A recent, internal, evaluation found that the practical support provided by the Education Pathways Program in terms of physically getting children to school each day was hugely beneficial for parents because it immediately reduced the chronic stress and worry that overwhelmed parents as a result of their homelessness. Over a 2.5 year period, 187 children were supported by the Education Pathways Program, of whom 85% were not enrolled in school.^{xxv}

Amplifying the voice of those with a lived experience of homelessness

Any policy solutions must take the agency and voice of people with a lived experience of homelessness into account. Since 2015, Launch Housing has been working with its Lived Experience Advisory Group (LEAG) as one part of a broader approach to client participation. The LEAG exists to support Launch Housing achieve its mission of ending homelessness and its role is to share opinions, ideas and advice on a broad range of organisational decisions.

Homelessness is traumatising and distressing, it is also chaotic and time-consuming; it leaves people feeling hopeless, stressed and depressed. People need to feel that someone is listening. It is about acknowledging their stories, respecting their courage and strengths, and their right to enjoy life too. This is reflected in the following two brief quotes from clients.

—

'I'll go into the system and then come out and just go 'stuff it', it's all just too hard, no-one's listening to me...More people need to listen...' ('Fran')

"People don't realise how chaotic it is when you're actually homeless...you can't just cook a basic...or even going to have a shower, if you're homeless it's like a complicated task, it takes up so much of your time, looking for housing...you don't really have time to do much else or focus on anything else'. ('Kym')

Homelessness is not inevitable

In conclusion, homelessness can be solved. It requires housing and it requires targeted support. It means taking what already works to scale and committing to make the investments needed.

And fundamentally, it's about honouring the social contract with our fellow citizens, who equally need and deserve housing. It's not solely the job of agencies like ours. This is a community issue that demands a community solution supported by all levels of government.

-
- ⁱ Source: Launch Housing Annual Report 2019: <https://www.launchhousing.org.au/annual-report-2019/>
- ⁱⁱ <http://chp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Homelessness-and-older-people-fact-sheet.pdf>
- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/shs-annual-report-18-19/data>
- ^{iv} <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/research-papers/homelessness-amongst-australian-veterans>
- ^v <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/shs-annual-report-18-19/data>
- ^{vi} Brackertz, N., Wilkinson, A., and Davison, J. (2018) Housing, homelessness and mental health: towards systems change, AHURI Research Paper, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/research-papers/housing-homelessness-and-mental-health-towards-systems-change>.
- Beer, A.; Baker, E.; Lester, L.; Daniel, L. The Relative Risk of Homelessness among Persons with a Disability: New Methods and Policy Insights. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* 2019, 16, 4304.
- ^{vii} AIHW, 2019, Data tables: Vic: Specialist homelessness services annual report 2017-18, AIHW, Canberra.
- ^{viii} ABS 2015a, *2014 General Social Survey, Australia, 2014, Cat. No. 41590DO001*, ABS, Canberra. Available at: <https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4159.0Main+Features12014?OpenDocument#Anchor5>
- ^{ix} Findings from AHURI report The changing geography of homelessness: a spatial analysis from 2001 to 2016: <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/313>
- ^x See: <https://www.launchhousing.org.au/australianhomelessnessmonitor/>
- ^{xi} Source: <https://dhhs.vic.gov.au/publications/rental-report>
- ^{xii} Productivity Commission (2019) *Mental Health*, Draft Report: Overview and Recommendations, October: <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/mental-health/draft>
- ^{xiii} <https://chp.org.au/media-releases/march-quarter-rental-report-shows-housing-crisis-continues-in-victoria/>
- ^{xiv} Ibid
- ^{xv} <https://dhhs.vic.gov.au/publications/rental-report>
- ^{xvi} Ibid
- ^{xvii} AIHW, 2019, Specialist Homelessness Services 2018-19, Data Tables
- ^{xviii} Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019. People in short-term or emergency accommodation: a profile of Specialist Homelessness Services clients. Cat. no. HOU 300. Canberra: AIHW.
- ^{xix} Productivity Commission, 2019, Report on Government Services, Chapter 18: Housing, Table 18A.1 (Total net recurrent expenditure on social housing). Available at: <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2019/housing-and-homelessness/housing>
- ^{xx} Community Housing Industry Association Victoria - *Submission to MAC on Planning Mechanisms for Affordable Housing*
- ^{xxi} AIHW, 2019, Specialist Homelessness Services 2018-19, Data Tables, (Table CLIENTS.8)
- ^{xxii} Gurrán, N., Gilbert, C., Gibb, K., van den Nouweland, R., James, A. and Phibbs, P. (2018) *Supporting affordable housing supply: inclusionary planning in new and renewing communities*, AHURI Final Report No. 297, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/final-reports/297>, doi:10.18408/ahuri-7313201.
- ^{xxiii} See: <https://www.bsl.org.au/research/projects/education-first-youth-foyers-evaluation/>
- ^{xxiv} Parsell, C, Petersen, M, Moutou, O, Culhane, D, Lucio, E, and Dick, A (2015) Brisbane Common Ground Evaluation: Final Report, prepared for The Queensland state government, Department of Housing and Public Work, Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland, Brisbane.
- ^{xxv} https://www.launchhousing.org.au/site/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Launch-Housing_Education-Pathways-Program_Evaluation-Report.pdf