

Victorian Homelessness 2020 Strategy
Submission Responding to Discussion Paper
November 2009



David Wright-Howie
Acting CEO
Council to Homeless Persons
E-mail: david@chp.org.au

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Introduction

CHP welcomes the release of the Victorian Homelessness 2020 Strategy Discussion Paper and the opportunity to respond and provide written feedback

About the Council to Homeless Persons

Established in 1972, the Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) is the peak Victorian body representing individuals and organisations with a stake or interest in homelessness.

Our mission is to work towards ending homelessness through leadership in policy, advocacy and sector development. We do this through:

- Promoting individual and systemic advocacy
- Promoting consumer participation
- Developing strategic relationships, partnerships and alliances to ensure the interest and issues of homeless people are addressed across all sector
- Educating the wider community on issues of homelessness
- Leading state and national policy development
- Representing and assisting organisations on sector related issues
- Promoting, facilitating and disseminating research, evaluation and continuous improvement in collaboration with others

CHP also incorporates the Homelessness Advocacy Service (HAS), which provides individual advocacy to homeless people and those at risk of homelessness, secondary consultation, training and consumer participation through the Peer Education Support Program (PESP). PESP is a consumer group, trained and supported to provide input into sector practice, community and government education and policy development relating to homelessness.

Homelessness: the starting point

The starting point for any major discussion about homelessness should be some articulation of defining homelessness and describing its causes and impact.

This is implicit in some of the early text of the discussion paper but it is important to state, at least to a wider audience, what we understand homelessness to mean and why the community and governments should be concerned about it.

It is not the intention of this paper to explore this fully but to provide some important elements for any definition and description.

For CHP, key characteristics in any definition should include:

- No or tenuous and temporary accommodation
- Little or no income and/or financial resources or no access to financial resources

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- Limited or no family and or social networks

The cultural definition of homelessness used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics to enumerate the homeless population is important as it describes the living circumstances of people experiencing homelessness. Whilst homelessness includes sleeping rough and living on the streets, most people experiencing homelessness are moving between temporary and inappropriate forms of accommodation including staying temporarily with friends and relatives, short term supported accommodation, boarding houses and caravan parks.

Homelessness is related both to a lack of essential material needs (housing, employment, education, health care) and breakdown in key community and family relationships.

The general perception of home is one of a safe and secure environment which leads to increased wellbeing, community connectedness and social participation.

The major cause of homelessness is social policy failure and not programmatic failure. The lack of affordable housing and access to sufficient income, employment, education and services are key drivers of homelessness.

Homelessness exacerbates and leads to significant health and well being issues which are a significant social and psychological cost to individuals and households but also a substantive financial cost to the public and human service system i.e. it costs the tax payer.

The impact of homelessness on people is considerable. People who are homeless can experience trauma, isolation, stigma and a lack of belonging and identity. Homelessness contributes to some people having more entrenched mental health, drug and alcohol and primary health issues requiring significant care.

Homelessness affects people from the cradle to the grave including children, young people, single headed families, couple headed families, single adults and older people. Indigenous people are over represented in the homeless population.

Homelessness is present in all regions, the inner city, middle and outer suburbs, regional centres and rural towns.

People experiencing homelessness are not homogenous. However, there are some central themes in their experiences that need to be harnessed for the policy response. It is therefore important that people experiencing homelessness are seen as key stakeholders and their voices are recorded as part of policy development.

Victoria: the record

On Census night in 2006, 23,300 people were recorded as being homeless and marginally housed in Victoria. There are considerable methodological challenges in recording the

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numbers of people experiencing homelessness. The anecdotal evidence and consultations CHP has undertaken with a range of stakeholders supports the view that most of these challenges relate to undercounting.

Victoria has the most substantive service response to homelessness of any state and territory in Australia. The first *Victorian Homelessness Strategy* released in 2002 was comprehensive and has led to some very important initiatives.

The broad approach to addressing disadvantage outlined in *Fairer Victoria* and policy frameworks related to mental health, early childhood, family violence and disability provide a good preventive platform.

The recent funding commitments to increase public and social housing by the Australian and Victorian government are also significant. However, it should be stated that the increase in social housing supply in Victoria has been marginal for a long period and on-going increases will be required to support the prevention and reduction of homelessness.

However, over the past decade, homelessness numbers taken on Census night have remained about the same, whilst homelessness services cope with increasing demand. The new strategy should result in the reduction of this demand through policy action involving a range of human service areas.

A key opportunity in this strategy is a commitment to reduce homelessness numbers through a genuine and accountable cross-government approach.

The Homelessness 2020 Strategy Vision for Victoria

Critical strategies and actions

Some of the critical strategies and actions should include:

- Transparent, accountable, sustained and planned investment and policy action and mechanisms to reduce homelessness by a range of human service Ministers and departments including primary health, mental health, child protection and justice.
- Sustained and substantive increase in social housing linked to support for people experiencing homelessness
- Policy emphasis on ‘longer term’ support and housing periods (2+ years) for clients of homelessness services to provide the stability to enable genuine outcomes
- A defined and valued role for ‘specialist’ homelessness services as an integral part of a broader policy and service delivery framework and approach to reduce homelessness.
- The development of policy streams that work across government that are dedicated to key target groups in the homeless population (e.g. families with children, young people, adults with high and complex needs, women escaping family violence)

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- The development of an outcomes measurement framework designed to assess and measure the real and authentic reduction in the numbers of people experiencing homelessness
- Workforce strategies and investment ensuring that professional workers are recruited and retained to enable homelessness policy outcomes are achieved

Challenges and opportunities to reducing homelessness

Key challenges include:

- Keeping homelessness on the policy and political agenda including continuing to educate and inform the community about the causes and impact of homelessness.
- Developing priorities for investment and policy
- Sustaining cross-government commitment and involvement
- Delivering, implementing and promoting clearly defined, cross-departmental service delivery initiatives and programs which are sustained over time
- Shaping and implementing a distinct and valued role for the ‘specialist’ homelessness service
- Assisting services to transition to a potentially new practice and service delivery approach
- Developing genuine and trusted measurements that assess progress
- Communicating a new vision, approach and response

Key opportunities include:

- Genuine policy impetus and environment for change, outcomes and targets
- Development of important and strategic relationships and mechanisms across government portfolios and with the non-government human service sector to address homelessness
- Defining, shaping and valuing specialist homelessness service response as part of a broader human service approach
- Gaining wider recognition of homelessness as an important policy issue across government and the community

Targeting of resources

The question about the targeting of resources poses many other further questions particularly related to how governments respond to low income and disadvantaged target groups including those experiencing homelessness. Some of these questions include:

- Will broader investment addressing social disadvantage and poverty as outlined in *Fairer Victoria* and the Australian government commitment to social inclusion continue? Will it complement specific policy regarding homelessness?
- What will be the Australian government’s on-going funding role with service delivery?
- Will there be an on-going commitment to increase social housing over the next 10 years and beyond?

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- Will the level of and access to income support through the social security system remain the same or be improved?

Some specific targeted measures could include:

- ‘Longer term’ support and housing for people experiencing homelessness catering for a diverse range of target population groups including families, young people and adults
- Specific community based mental health support, care and accommodation initiatives for people who have experienced long term or ‘chronic’ homelessness and mental health and primary health issues
- Funding for professional workforce based on core competencies to deliver key outcomes including training and professional development support
- Dedicated education and training and labour market support for people experiencing homelessness for all target groups especially young people
- Family support programs employing an early intervention practice approach located in areas with large numbers of low-income families with children
- Transition initiatives assisting people assessed at risk and exiting custodial and corrective institutions

Policy and service delivery mechanisms

The development of a broad policy framework complemented by clear outcomes measurements is essential for the implementation of the strategy.

Some substantive and difficult work is required to develop and define outcomes that can be measured consistently over time.

Consensus or final decisions need to be made on outcome themes or groupings. However, there should always be room for innovation, reflection and review.

The development and implementation of outcomes measurement must be regularly reviewed and assessed by government and external stakeholders working together.

Both central and regional data collection and outcome measurement teams, committees and groups should be established to analyse data and information as well as monitor the effectiveness of outcome measurements in a broad and regional context.

This should be complemented by regular program and policy evaluation which involves both assessment of quantitative measures and qualitative narrative and description.

Developing outcome measurements and evaluation processes should involve mechanisms that engage with people who have experienced homelessness or ‘consumers’.

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Regional and sub-regional plans should be developed to monitor and inform the Victorian strategy. Regions have distinct characteristics and needs which should be incorporated into the overall strategy.

Policy development regarding key homeless sub-populations is important for the design and implementation of the outcomes measurement framework and service delivery programs. These sub-populations include families with children, young people, adults with high and complex needs, older people, and indigenous people.

The strategy should also include engagement and policy development both within government and particularly between government and external providers relating to key broad human service areas including mental health, education, primary health, justice, child welfare and protection. This will be important in sustaining a genuine and on-going cross-government approach.

Homelessness and Social Inclusion

Social inclusion should be a key part and characteristic of the vision of the Homelessness 2020 strategy and drive its objectives, goals and outcomes.

The strategy should include a vision statement which reflects the genuine commitment to reduce homelessness by 2020 through initiatives, activities, investment, action and change which promotes and enacts social inclusion.

Social inclusion can be viewed as an all encompassing, 'catch all' concept and term. Currently and historically, there is considerable debate about definitions and understanding of social inclusion.

It is important that a well developed articulation of social inclusion in relation to homelessness is expressed in the strategy indicators and framework.

For the strategy, social inclusion should be concrete and defined and more than just mere words.

Some of the themes in relation to the on-going policy and practice development of social inclusion in relation to homelessness should include:

- Investment in material resources for people experiencing homelessness to enable full participation in society.
- Commitment to activity that improves social, family and community relationships.
- Supporting people to engage in and access universal social and economic systems such as employment, education and health care.
- Enacting legislation and laws that are genuinely inclusive and do not seek to exclude people because of their socio-economic status or homelessness.
- Acknowledging people who experience homelessness as an important stakeholder and including them in policy development and political decision making.

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In addition to the considerations provided in the discussion paper, other practical social inclusion initiatives could include:

- Communication strategy informing the community about homelessness, its causes and impact, the services providing support and assistance and the strategy vision and commitment.
- Investment in initiatives that involve and include people who experience homelessness as a stakeholder to inform policy development and implementation.

Prevention

Whilst the individual actions of people can contribute to them becoming homeless, homelessness is largely caused by social policy and systemic failure.

This is well documented and includes the lack of affordable housing, inadequate income support, access to employment and the labour market, access to education and training.

Prevention of homelessness therefore largely sits with mainstream and universal service systems. It is about improving the life outcomes of low income citizens and meeting essential needs that ensure that people do not fall into homelessness.

‘Specialist’ homelessness services would inform and engage with mainstream and universal services on prevention strategies and approaches but it would not be their responsibility. The experience of and information provided by homelessness services in the development of prevention strategies would need to be valued and acknowledged.

Key prevention policy action would include:

- The provision of affordable housing for all citizens particularly public, social and community housing for low income people
- Income support for individuals and families to enable them to meet essential material needs
- Investment in improving and developing the infrastructure and services of areas with high numbers of people from low socio-economic backgrounds
- Primary health services available to all with specific emphasis on low income communities
- Employment, education and training programs in areas of growing unemployment or significant economic restructuring
- Provision of community based mental health care and accommodation services.
- Strategies and programs to ensure that children and young people remain in education.

Early Intervention

Early intervention is a term or concept that has been referred to as part of the homelessness policy discourse for a long time.

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Apart from some relatively small-scale but significant programs such as Reconnect and Home Advice, there have been little dedicated programmatic approaches and responses related to early intervention and homelessness.

Defining, describing and articulating early intervention requires regular policy and practice reflection. However, as the discussion paper describes, it is about ensuring that the homelessness experience is of short duration or perhaps, in some cases, does not eventuate at all.

Homelessness support and accommodation services have adopted localised early intervention practices and initiatives. However, they have increasingly had to concentrate on transitional support and housing work due to high service demand.

Whilst early intervention is a practice approach, it is important that dedicated statewide programs be developed to undertake early intervention work. Early intervention needs to be a key programmatic function.

Under a Victorian early intervention programmatic framework there should be scope for some flexibility regarding:

- The needs of specific target groups such as families with children, young people, older people
- Geographic or regional needs and issues. Awareness of local needs and priorities would be a key part of early intervention services.

Non-government agencies covering a distinct geographic catchment area with good local knowledge and networks and practice knowledge and awareness of homelessness would be well placed to deliver early intervention programs.

Essential to the delivery of early intervention programs would extensive relationships with mainstream and universal services involving regular exchange of local and regional need information and protocol agreements and arrangements.

An important element of early intervention programs would be to alert mainstream and universal services to the needs of clients and engage them to respond. Early intervention services therefore can become like a broker to ensure that the homelessness experience or potential homelessness experience is short.

Specialist Homelessness Services, Mainstream Services and Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness

What are specialist homelessness services? The definition of this service type will greater clarification and definition in the action plan of the strategy and the implementation stage.

The definition provided in the discussion paper requires some strengthening.

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Specialist homelessness services are services whose core and primary business and target group is people experiencing homelessness or at imminent risk of homelessness. The strategic planning and mission documents of these services should articulate a dedicated commitment to people experiencing homelessness and addressing homelessness as an issue. Funding arrangements for these services should articulate this specific commitment.

Mainstream services, as defined in the discussion paper, are services which are generalist in nature, being either universal (such as Centrelink or community health services) or meeting the needs of a substantial group in the community (such as Aged Care or mental health services).

The primary focus of specialist homelessness services across Victoria should be leading and facilitating client centred support and case management for people experiencing homelessness. This work would be enabling clients to make a transition from the instability and disempowering circumstances of homelessness to long term sustainable outcomes. Workers in specialist homelessness services should be the key or lead case manager in supporting clients on a range of issues, brokering and accessing other resources and expertise, to achieve sustained outcomes. The duration of support would be determined by a holistic assessment process and negotiated through the professional relationship between client and worker. This should be the emphasis of funding, policy and practice development for specialist homelessness services. The provision of social or community housing for many clients will complement this support work.

This primary role for specialist homelessness services can only be adopted in a policy and service delivery framework where other elements of the service system play their role and further strategies are developed including:

- Large institutional human service systems such as prisons, custodial care, and child protection are accountable to and invest in the prevention of clients exiting into homelessness.
- A substantial outcomes definition and measurement framework informing and guiding service delivery practice
- Prioritising of access and availability to public and community housing for people experiencing homelessness.
- On-going availability and provision of dedicated social housing linked with support for key target groups
- Workforce investment and strategies to ensure the employment of qualified, skilled case managers linked to the achievement of core capabilities and competencies. Improved professional development and training would need to be provided to these workers including accredited training.
- Mechanisms that ensure the recognition and acknowledgement of specialist homelessness services as the key or lead case manager across the human service system.

How to both manage demand and divert people effectively from the homelessness service system are likely to remain as major challenges. Prevention strategies and policy from

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mainstream and universal service systems and early intervention programs should partly assist this. However, demand on services, particularly in key locations, is likely to remain high and some innovative and flexible responses for people requiring immediate accommodation and support will be required. Some policy and practice considerations here could be:

- A review of the use of HEF and other flexible brokerage funds
- Outreach work to private accommodation such as caravan parks and registered rooming houses.

Substantive partnership agreements and arrangements with mainstream and other non-government services would need to support the primary focus of specialist homelessness services including mental health, drug and alcohol services and employment services. These agreements and arrangements would guide service delivery practice particularly in cases where there are several agencies or types of specialist services involved. They would also be respectful of professional expertise and boundaries and determine the extent and nature of client information sharing. These agreements and relationships are best monitored at a local and regional level and mechanisms should be developed that continue to assess this. Many local and regional mechanisms are already established and could be built on and enhanced. Statewide accountability and policy arrangements should provide a framework for this and promote inter-sector practice collaboration.

Whole of Government approaches

Homelessness is a multi-faceted issue driven by systemic failure but combined with the breakdown in community and family relationships and personal circumstances.

It is essential that the response to homelessness not be the responsibility or preserve of one human service area.

It is important that a whole of government approach is enacted both from the top down and the bottom up.

The Victorian government has already developed cross-Ministerial councils and inter-departmental committees on homelessness and this is a significant ‘top-down’ first step.

The work of these processes should determine the policy arrangements and accountability for all the major human service departments and areas to work to reducing homelessness and meeting stated targets.

Inter-sector partnerships between different human service arenas working with people experiencing homelessness that are developed at the local and regional level should be supported, encouraged and even invested in to ensure that the ‘whole of government’ approaches work on the ground. This would be part of the ‘bottom up’ contribution to the strategy.

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The whole of government approach should combine responsibilities and accountabilities for all the major government human service areas and dedicated policy development and service delivery arrangements between particular areas e.g. housing and mental health. In meeting particular outcomes, it is likely that one area would need to have primary or lead responsibility. For example, the response to long term, 'chronic' homelessness could be led by the mental health area with important complementary responsibility from housing, disability and aged care. The inter-department committee and the Ministerial council will need to discuss, negotiate and agree on the key aspects of the Victorian government approach.

The responsibility of other levels of government in responding and addressing homelessness should also be determined. Whilst the Australian government is less responsible for service delivery implementation, policy relating to income support, employment and education does have a significant impact on state government policy and the lives of many people experiencing homelessness. The role of local government, particularly in regional planning and needs analysis and identification also needs to be established.

A Victorian government policy accountability framework will need to be established which is regularly reviewed and updated over time. This should be informed by consistent definitions and understanding of homelessness targets and outcomes. Whilst shaping the overall policy framework, it is likely that this framework will need to be relatively broad. There is a balance to be struck between government policy prescription and regional and local diversity and need and the development and encouragement of innovative policy and practice initiatives.

Focus on Individual

Outcomes are measures of the direct effects of programs, policy and service delivery activity on people experiencing homelessness.

The development and implementation of an outcomes measurement framework is essential to the Homelessness 2020 strategy.

The recent Productivity Commission report regarding the Not for Profit sector outlined some of the key characteristics of a framework. These include:

- Providing a means of aggregating data and allowing for comparisons
- Usable and adaptable regardless of the size and capacity of organisations
- Is sufficiently rigorous to enable meaningful comparisons
- Recognition that not all contributions can be quantified
- Flexible enough to acknowledge diverse activities, organisational forms and contributions of unique programs and/or initiatives.

The reduction of homelessness should be the major theme and driver supporting outcomes for the strategy. This includes effective prevention policy creating an environment where people are less likely to become homeless, timely intervention to

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reduce the duration of homelessness and sustainable service delivery approaches and solutions which move people out of homelessness and build a life away from homelessness.

Service delivery interventions and policy should ensure outcomes that enable people not to return to the circumstances of homelessness.

Broad outcomes should encompass themes of stability, safety, and community connectedness, involvement in mainstream economic and social systems and these relate to all target groups.

These themes may be expressed differently for target groups and sub-populations. For example:

Children: housing stability, settled in primary school, development of friends and peer group, improvement in health and well being indicators

Young people: reconciliation or reunification with family, attendance and involvement in vocational education and training

Parents: housing stability, access to and involvement in social networks, improved relationships with children

Single Adults: access to and maintaining long term housing, access to health and well-being services, involvement in community activities,

People experiencing homelessness are not homogenous and these examples are reflective of some outcome themes.

Critical elements of best practice, outcome-focused service delivery models include:

- A professional relationship between workers and clients where there is rapport and understanding
- Substantive and holistic assessment of client needs
- Knowledge and information about the impact of homelessness and human service system programs and resources
- Flexibility regarding the duration of client support including the capacity to work with specific clients for long periods (2+ years)
- Access to and availability of a diverse range of resources including housing, counseling, mental health care, drug and alcohol support, employment services, education and training. This would include the capacity to access or purchase unique or unusual types of support services or programs that enhance social inclusion.
- Professional staff team approaches assisting and supporting regular review of client needs and information sharing

Policy regarding distinct but broad target groups should be developed, linked with the outcomes measurement framework. A discrete range of service programs are implemented to meet policy objectives. Some current service programs may need to be streamlined or married with new programs so that the full set of programs can work effectively to meet policy goals. Accountability for outcomes or the resolution of a

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person's situation would need to be attributed to the organisation delivering a service program. However, more importantly outcomes would be linked to assessing the progress and effectiveness of programs overall both within a region and across Victoria.

Partnership and effective working relationships between specialist homelessness services and mainstream services will be critically important. Protocol agreements and arrangements at a government policy level and at the local and regional level should inform service delivery practice. Best practice and innovation will be enhanced:

- where there is respect and acknowledgement of the expertise, understanding and assessment practice paradigms which in turn can lead to improvements in service delivery approach and skill development
- flexibility in practice approaches combined with a commitment to meet the best needs of the client
- established mechanisms to share appropriate and relevant client information
- high level policy arrangements that encourage and support partnerships and collaborative working relationships including recognition of partnerships is new funding models

The policy and outcomes measurement framework should be a key guide to the case management approach. This should include some consistent definitions, themes and objectives. However, some differences in case management approaches, particularly for specific target groups, and, where demonstrated, responding to particular needs in geographical locations. Service delivery agencies should be enabled to have significant input into the development of case management approaches. These approaches should also be reviewed at regular intervals after implementation.

The alignment of housing stock with homelessness is an important element in meeting targets. For many people experiencing homelessness it is the combination of support and housing which delivers outcomes. The need for an overall increase in supply of social housing is well documented and despite recent government commitments this will continue to be the case. Developing a range of supported housing models for different target groups will be important. The implementation of the supportive housing Common Ground model for adults and a Foyer-like accommodation approach for young people is significant first step in the process. The review of and recommended improvements to the waiting list for public housing also should assist access of people experiencing homelessness to housing. Access by people experiencing homelessness to Housing Associations, the major housing growth vehicle in Victoria, needs to be improved. CHP is regularly informed that access by homeless clients to this form of housing is currently poor.

Responding to the diverse range of needs of individuals and households experiencing homelessness by services is vital. The capacity to do so however will be greatly influenced by policy and investment to prevent homelessness and genuine cross-government accountability and commitment.