

## **Discussion paper**

### **Homelessness**

#### **Background**

On 27 January 2008, the Prime Minister, the Hon Kevin Rudd MP and the Minister for Housing, the Hon Tanya Plibersek MP, announced the Australian Government's new approach to tackling the problem of homelessness in Australia.

The process will involve the development of a green (consultation) paper, due to be released in May 2008, followed by a consultation period and the development of a white (strategic plan) paper, to be released in August or September 2008.

The CEO of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Tony Nicholson, will chair a Homelessness White Paper Steering Committee assisting the Government in developing both green and white papers. Other Group members are Heather Nancarrow and Anna Buduls

The Group will provide leadership and direction on the core elements of a new approach that will:

- prevent homelessness
- improve services
- create exit points to secure longer term housing
- stop the cycle of homelessness.

#### **Who is homeless?**

The 2001 census estimated that there were 100,000 people who were homeless on any given night. Of these:

- almost half (49%) were staying with family and friends and had no home of their own
- 14% were sleeping rough in parks and tents or on the street
- 23 % were in insecure and substandard accommodation (such as boarding houses)
- 14% were in SAAP or other crisis services.

People who are homeless are of all ages. The 2001 census identified:

- 10,000 children under 12 years
- 6,754 families, comprising 23,000 individuals
- 36,173 young people between the ages of 12 and 24
- 58,116 single people
- around 6,000 people aged 65 years or older.

The number of families with children seeking assistance from SAAP services increased by 43% between 1996 and 2006. Around 55,000 children accompany their parents to a SAAP service each year, of whom 73% are under 10 years.

## **Complexity of homelessness**

Homelessness is complex. It is more than being houseless. There are critical correlations between lack of access to adequate housing, poor health, low educational attainment, unemployment and social exclusion.

Work done for the South Australian Social Inclusion Unit has identified structural and personal issues as causes of homelessness, as well as a number of risk factors.<sup>1</sup> The structural issues include: housing affordability and availability; discrimination; unemployment; poverty and income inequality. The personal issues include: lack of skills and experience in maintaining a tenancy; disability; poor physical or mental health; alcohol and other substance abuse; criminality. The risks identified include: family violence and/or abuse; change in family structure; low income and rising costs; being a young person in independent housing disadvantaged by structural and situational issues.

## **Current approach**

Australia's primary response to homelessness is the joint commonwealth/state Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP). SAAP aims to assist people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless to achieve the maximum possible degree of self-reliance and independence by providing transitional supported accommodation and a range of related support services.

The stated objectives of SAAP as set out in the SAAP V (2005-2010) multilateral agreement are:

' ... to provide transitional supported accommodation and a range of related support services, in order to help people who are homeless achieve the maximum possible degree of self-reliance and independence.'

The priorities are set out as:

- increase involvement in early intervention and prevention strategies
- provide better assistance to people who have a number of support needs
- provide ongoing assistance to ensure stability for clients post-crisis.

## **What works?**

The United States of America and the United Kingdom, as well as South Australia have taken a new approach to fighting homelessness and are reportedly achieving success in reducing homelessness. Common elements<sup>2</sup> to the successful approaches being adopted have been identified as:

- setting a defined period and target for reduction of homelessness (generally 10 years and a 50% reduction have been set)
- counting people who are homeless, in particular, undertaking regular (at least annual) counts of people sleeping rough (if you do not know the size of the problem, how can you set and meet targets?)
- focusing on people who are chronically homeless, as while a small group (around 10 to 15% of the homeless population), they consume most resources across a range of health, community services (including homelessness services) and custodial spheres. By focusing on this group and dealing long term with their issues, it is argued that resources are released to help many more people

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute for Social Research (2003), *Towards a Predictive Model of Homelessness in South Australia*

<sup>2</sup> See Haggerty, R (2005), *Ending Homelessness in South Australia* and Haggerty, R (2007), *Smart Moves: Spending to Saving, Streets to Home*

- providing permanent housing, not transitional shelter, and then dealing holistically with people's issues and needs, rather than imposing rules or allowing program boundaries to dictate responses, and providing the ongoing support needed to keep that housing
- preventing homelessness by focusing on at risk people young people and people at the point of discharge from institutions such as foster care or state wardship, hospitals, mental health facilities, prisons and remand and providing them housing and connecting them to education, training and employment opportunities and, importantly, providing ongoing support to sustain housing and other activities
- involving the community by broadening the range of stakeholders informed and involved and educating citizens about the complexity of homelessness and issues faced by people who are homeless and how they can support the fight against homelessness
- a 'joined-up' approach, involving disciplined collaboration across government agencies, between government agencies and community sector organisations and between community sector organisations themselves, with regular frank sharing of information about what is and what is not working in tackling issues for clients
- leadership and personal commitment from the top. In the case of the UK, then Prime Minister, Tony Blair led the charge. In the US, President Bush has appointed a 'homelessness csar'. In South Australia, the Premier has taken the lead. In the UK and SA, authority has been delegated to a single person who is held accountable and holds others accountable to achievement of the goal.

Is this supported by Anglicare Australia members' experience?

### **Developing Anglicare Australia's response**

Anglicare Australia has a wealth of experience to draw on in formulating its response to the Green Paper and informing the government's new approach to homelessness. In 2006 - 2007 the member agencies together provided services to over 450,000 Australians in over 2,030 locations across the country, involving over 10,500 staff and 20,000 volunteers. Many of these Australians were in vulnerable positions, with complex problems that led them to seek assistance. The kinds of services provided included:

- emergency relief and financial counselling or no interest loans to people in financial crisis (27%)
- support to families, including mediation and counselling (21%)
- services to children and young people (10%)
- other community services, including community development, parish-based care, etc (16%)
- disability, mental health and alcohol and drug support (3%)
- and support for people through housing and homelessness services (5%).

### **Questions**

What advice should Anglicare Australia give to the Minister for Housing? In considering this, it might be useful to focus on the following issues:

- who is at risk of homelessness? or of becoming homeless time and again?
- based on our experience, what approaches/strategies work and for whom? and at what point(s)?
- what does not work? why? for whom?

- how can the cycle of homelessness be broken?

Are there other critical questions that Anglicare Australia should consider in formulating our advice to the Minister?

**Strategy**

Anglicare Australia will:

- seek member agencies' views on what works and what does not
- respond to the government's Green Paper (to be released in May)
- analyse the White Paper (due to be released in August/September) and provide feedback to government
- monitor implementation and outcomes of a new homelessness strategy