

Anti-poverty priorities

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The social services portfolios of federal and state governments lend themselves to buzz words.

While expressions like "priority investment" and "encourage people to seek work" seem well-intentioned they frequently don't reflect the complexity of poverty in Australia.

Anti-Poverty Week takes place this year between 18-22 October.

At Anglicare Australia, we've developed some Anti Poverty Priorities because it's clear to us, through consistent work across our network of 36 providers, that many Australians are doing it tough, and we need to think more laterally about how to address their varied needs.

We need to question the tacit assumption that changes to and for the individual will give them complete agency to change their whole circumstances.

As we have noted in our media commentary around this issue, enthusiasm for innovative approaches must be tempered with the acknowledgement that there is a wider economic story at play: that of too few jobs, not enough housing and, whilst on government benefits, not enough income.

More than ever, pressure is being placed on recipients of government benefits to step up and 'take responsibility', yet often for situations that are entirely out of their control.

Punitive measures like reducing social security payments and the idea of enforcing waiting times before payments can be accessed have been floated, and are being discussed in Parliament.

Our ongoing Anti-Poverty Priorities at Anglicare Australia are affordable housing, secure work and adequate income.

So, let's begin with housing. Our Rental Affordability Snapshot has consistently shown over the last seven years that affordable housing for those without secure work/adequate income is little more than a dream.

Over the first weekend in April, the Anglicare member network surveyed 75,410 rental properties across Australia and found just 21 properties were affordable for single adults living on Newstart, and only one was suitable for young people living on Youth Allowance.

And despite the higher level of pensions compared to allowances, affordable rentals were extremely limited for a single person living on any government payment. Even a single person on the minimum wage would have found only just over 5% of those properties affordable, and most of those rooms in share houses.

Our flagship publication, the *State of the Family report* will be launched on 31 October. It focuses on employment and its title: *Position Vacant? When the Jobs Aren't There* is particularly apt.

The lead essay of the report argues that the 2016 federal election slogan of "jobs and growth" perpetuates the myth that employment is a simple equation: one person plus one job equals long-term employment. But for people looking for their first job, for those who need support to re-enter the workforce, and for people whose positions have been made redundant due to industry disruption, it often seems the jobs just aren't there.

If we had a view that people could live well, and make a real difference to the wellbeing of others, without necessarily having a job then the shortage of job opportunities might not be so crucial. But too much of our common culture is all about being a consumer and having a job. So the fact that there isn't a real plan to create the work we expect people to do is a big part of the poverty trap.

Adequate income is increasingly under threat. Social Services Minister Christian Porter told Sky News that spending more money on welfare was not the answer, after a number of not-for-profits called for an increase to

the Newstart payment. Currently, Newstart is a mere \$528.70 a fortnight for singles and \$477.40 each for couples.

Anglicare's research shows us that people on Newstart spend 122 percent of their income – going backwards from day one, and are likely to be in housing stress and face food insecurity.

They experience living standards that are falling even further.

Our research shows that the failure to lift the basic income will erode the capacity of people to find work, look after their family, and have any reasonable quality of life.

There are not enough jobs, social security payments are too low, and affordable housing is simply out of reach for far too many people on low incomes.

So, our #AntiPovertyPriority is to challenge those who think that it's realistic to eat, pay rent, and job seek on a Newstart payment.

Out #AntiPovertyPriority is to look at creative ways in which we can offer dignity and a chance to participate for those who miss out on basic education and training.

Our #AntiPovertyPriority is to develop about ways for all governments, the community sector and private companies to contribute to solutions to Australia's housing crisis.