

Homelessness

Position Statement

Position

Homelessness is a chronic problem in Australia, with the lack of long-term affordable housing continuing to be the greatest barrier in reducing homelessness. Access to safe, secure, appropriate and affordable housing is a basic human right, and is an essential requirement in ensuring health and wellbeing for all Australians. Without adequate housing, people may find it difficult to participate in employment or education, and often experience exclusion from their communities.

There has been a failure from all levels of government to provide adequate funding and support to end homelessness. The lack of sufficient support for early intervention and prevention of homelessness has led to an increasing number of Australians having inadequate access to housing, particularly those on low incomes and those escaping family and domestic violence.

Baptist Care Australia supports a Housing First approach to homelessness. This model focuses on providing appropriate and affordable long-term housing to those experiencing and at risk of homelessness, while providing additional support services to help address the root causes of homelessness in the longer term. We believe that rather than managing homelessness, government funding and policy should focus on ending homelessness.

Background

Homelessness is not just defined by rough sleeping or living in an improvised dwelling. The Australian Government has determined that when a person does not have suitable accommodation alternatives they are considered homeless if their current living arrangement: is in an inadequate dwelling, has no tenure or their initial tenure is short and not extendable, or does not allow them to have control of, and access for space for social relations.ⁱ

Homelessness is often the expression of a number of complex challenges in a person's life. People become homeless under a diverse range of circumstances and experience homelessness differently.ⁱⁱ Public perception that homelessness is solely caused by laziness or a lack of will to be employed is dangerous and factually untrue. There are many causes of homelessness. Many people who become homeless have struggled with considerable personal disadvantage throughout their lives. This may include poverty or long-term unemployment, poor education, violence, mental health problems, disability and substance abuse. In some cases, a specific event can trigger homelessness – this could be domestic violence, being evicted from stable housing, losing a job or a period of high financial stress.ⁱⁱⁱ

To end homelessness, a set of complementary strategies from all tiers of government is required to support both those at risk of homelessness, before they become homeless, as well as those who are actually experiencing homelessness.

Homelessness can be prevented by tackling the structural drivers of homelessness such as entrenched disadvantage, the shortage of affordable housing, and unemployment. Groups at a

particular risk of homelessness include women and children escaping violence, single older women, older people in housing stress, people with substance misuse and those experiencing mental illness, youth experiencing family breakdown, Indigenous Australians and those leaving state care. It is far more cost effective to manage these challenges before a person experiences chronic homelessness and some of the issues become entrenched.

A key issue in tackling homelessness is the availability of support services for people at risk. Support services need to focus on preventing people in supported accommodation from losing their home. There also needs to be the provision of ongoing support for people with complex needs who are or who have previously been homeless. A shortfall in government funding means that it has been difficult for frontline service providers to deal with the complexity of some clients' issues, reducing the likelihood of clients with complex needs achieving long-term change and maintaining their tenancies.

Baptist Care Australia acknowledges the significant lack in capacity of homelessness and domestic violence organisations to meet current demand for services. Many providers are simply unable to help people in need to due to the lack of public, community or affordable housing properties available.^{iv} A Housing First model would assist these organisations in being able to better support those in need.

Central to the Housing First model is the belief that homelessness cannot be resolved by simply funding crisis accommodation. Crisis accommodation does not provide a long-term solution to homelessness and is not financially sustainable. Instead, the Housing First model prioritises providing permanent housing to those experiencing homelessness, serving as a platform from which they can start to work towards their personal goals. The Housing First approach sees housing as a central component of people being able to address other complex issues, and does not discriminate against people who are not able to deal with their challenges before they gain access to housing. This approach links people with organisations that can provide support and assistance in tackling these challenges. In addition to the social benefits, the Housing First model brings a range of financial benefits as the relative costs of housing someone under this model are significantly lower than allowing them to remain homeless or funding alternative models.^v

Solutions

To effectively address homelessness in Australia:

- There is an immediate need for secure long-term funding, to provide both additional low-income housing opportunities and services that prevent, intervene early and support people experiencing homelessness.
- There needs to be national coordination and funding to address homelessness. This coordination needs to include all levels of government as well as local service provider organisations. A National Plan should be developed through consultation with governments, providers and consumers that would form the blueprint for future homelessness policy.
- Federal and State governments must introduce and fund the 'no exits into homelessness' program introduced by the 'Road Home' White Paper, ensuring that people transitioning from hospitals, prisons, child safety and youth detention are not forced into homelessness.
- Governments must strengthen existing safeguards to make evictions from public housing a last resort.

- Further consideration needs to take place on how social impact investment and other innovative funding initiatives may be able to help fund a housing-first model, as well as crisis services.

Why we care

Baptist Care Australia is a passionate, innovative, Christian association of Baptist organisations around Australia. Our members bring life-enriching care to their clients and residents, their families and communities. Our care for people arises from our belief that God desires wholeness in all aspects of life. Our collective mission is to express Christ's love as we serve people and includes addressing their physical, emotional and spiritual needs. Our members have an annual turnover of around \$700 million, employ around 9,000 staff, and engage with more than 2,500 volunteers annually. Each year, our services directly touch the lives of more than 190,000 Australians.

The Baptist Care Australia network provides social and affordable housing for more than 500 households as well as crisis accommodation for domestic violence victims, refugees and disadvantaged young people. Along with a safe place to live, support services are provided to help residents rebuild their lives, connect with their communities, and live independently while they age or live with disability.

ⁱ ABS, Information Paper - A Statistical Definition of Homelessness, 2012

ⁱⁱ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, The diversity of Australia's homeless population, 2015

ⁱⁱⁱ AHURI, Better understanding entries and exits from homelessness, 2016

^{iv} AHURI, Modelling housing need to 2025, 2017

^v University of Melbourne, The case for investing in last resort housing, 2017