

INQUIRY INTO HOMELESSNESS IN AUSTRALIA

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I live in North Melbourne, Victoria. Living close to a large city many of my 'neighbours' are homeless. I also live opposite what was a public housing estate which is being demolished and will eventually contain community housing, private housing and as school. But no public housing.

Under Victoria's "Public" Housing Renewal Program public housing estates across Melbourne, and eventually in regional areas, are to be bulldozed and replaced by a mix of private and community housing. Community housing providers charge higher rents than public housing tenants pay. This disadvantages those on welfare or intermittent or insecure employment. And the number of bedrooms available in the community housing that is planned will be only slightly more, or even less, than were available in the public housing that is being replaced. That is, it will not house appreciably more tenants than exist today, despite the disruption to the lives of tenants forced to relocate.

And this is the pattern in my state. Secure and affordable public housing is being demolished or handed over to community housing providers, who are variable in the support and services they provide, and charge more in rent than public housing. Some charge fees in addition to rent.

If you want to solve homelessness, build more affordable homes. And the most affordable homes are in public housing. It also provides security of tenure so that those with special needs can be helped and supported for the time necessary. Community housing, as well as being more expensive, is less secure.

Anglicare's Rental Affordability surveys remind us regularly that there are virtually no homes available to rent for anyone on welfare – particularly Newstart - and those working but on a low income who find somewhere to live generally suffer rent stress, paying more than 30% of their income on rent. If Newstart were to be increased paying rent would not be the insurmountable barrier to decent housing that it currently is (with the additional benefit that more money circulating in the community would stimulate the economy).

The Legislative Council Inquiry into the Public Housing Renewal Program reported that at 31 March 2018 there were 82,499 individuals on the waiting list for public housing in this state. The number of applicants on the Victorian Housing Register, incorporating the lists from community housing providers, is even higher, and growing. The government needs a plan to reduce the waiting lists – urgently - or nothing will change, and the homeless will continue to live on the streets, in their cars, couch surf. Some young people are forced into unsafe environments where they pay for a place to live with sexual favours.

The recent Productivity Commission Report on Government Services reveals that Victoria's spending on social housing, including public housing, is \$92.02 per person compared to the national average of \$159.10.

Until governments fund housing that is affordable for those who are homeless, nothing will change. Yet while the cost of building public housing is carefully costed, the costs of homelessness are ignored. Mental health deteriorates, the cost of this and other health conditions grows, you cannot work if you do not have a home base that enables you to manage your hygiene and keep up appearances, and children miss school and become part of a cycle of homelessness for which they pay and society pays.

To reduce homelessness governments need to rapidly expand the public housing by utilising excess public land to build more public housing; audit and assess possible sites in government hands before any sale of public land, and empower local councils to expand public housing by making inclusionary zoning mandatory.

The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute is just one example of independent research that has been undertaken showing causal links between homelessness and lack of public housing. Doubtless they will be submitting to this inquiry. There is no need to delay action by calling for more research. People are literally dying on waiting lists for public housing and it is in the power of governments to provide it just as they do other forms of infrastructure.

And with the housing must come support services if the tenancies are to be durable. Once again there is a wealth of research available that demonstrates the importance of 'housing first' principles when providing homes to those who have been homeless, particularly the long-term homeless. And there are lived experiences in countries like Finland which show how it can be done.

The causes of homelessness are not a mystery. Why governments are so lacking in compassion is a mystery.

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