

**Coalition Against Youth Homelessness Submission to
Parliamentary 'Inquiry into Homelessness Legislation' 2009**

Summary

On any given night, across Australia, there over 105,000¹ people experience homelessness. This figure has increased since the 2001 census of 100,000 people who are homeless in an economic environment that has been described as 'booming'. Increases have been reported for families, people aged over 55 and young people aged between 19 – 24. These figures could be significantly higher without the existence of the federally and state funded Supported Accommodation Assistance Programs that have in the past worked within the Supported Accommodation Assistance Act 1994.

The SAA Act 1994, in its present state, is largely prescriptive and focussed on contract management agreements. Although this could and would be a continuing focus for any new legislation for homelessness that is developed, the Act could go further in articulating guidance around early intervention and prevention practises and emphasise the need for cross sector partnerships and arrangements.

Legislation should be extended to include a statutory requirement for the State Minister of Housing responsible for overseeing housing and homelessness to produce a homelessness strategy every 10 years. Comments that will be made in addressing the terms of reference as outlined in this inquiry be made to ensure that homelessness legislation reflects the underpinnings of what could be the minimum requirements set for future homelessness strategies for preventing and tackling homelessness.

The legislation needs to expand the definition of 'homelessness' and realise that differing groups will experience homelessness in differing ways. Legislation that limits diversity within the consumer group will not provide homelessness support that benefits the community. Root causes of homelessness can be addressed when acknowledging the diversity of the people that it affects. For early intervention strategies to be successful, they should be target group specific and not 'one size fits all'. Once target groups are established needs and issues will become apparent, for instance, the collocation of young people with housing options related to education, training and employment will create avenues for early intervention. Legislation allowing for flexibility of service delivery should be sought in order to best address the personal causes of homelessness.

Legislation needs to allow for the differing needs of certain geographic locations; increased resources should be allocated so that all communities can adequately respond to homelessness in their area. Progressive legislation should empower local areas to respond to the differing needs of their communities. Further to this, the capacity of communities to deal with homelessness should be examined. Legislation that bridges the gaps between client's needs and program capacity is essential.

¹ Chamberlain, C & MacKensie, D (2006) Counting the Homeless 2006 (ABS, Canberra); AIHW

The Special Committee on Homelessness should involve key stakeholders from community groups involved in direct service provision. Legislation should be service driven and work within an evidence based model, it should not curtail current best practice provision.

Legislation needs to be realistic in its intentions and not aim for goals that may not be attained. Increased housing must be made available in order to offer accommodation to all rough sleepers by 2020. Without realistic aims, legislation sets people up to fail, high targets are admirable but need to be viewed within current economic and social limitations. An increase in the amount of housing stock is needed, however, legislation should allow for greater access to it by at risk groups, such as, young people and indigenous young people.

Staff that are employed within housing agencies influence the quality of service that people who are experiencing homelessness will receive. Legislation should encourage the up skilling and training of the sector. Positive legislation should produce beneficial results well into the future.

Changes to current legislation should be driven by need and not by bureaucracy. Creating a system that is confusing and hard to navigate for consumers will not produce results that are aimed for within the White Paper.

This submission will address the terms of reference that has been set for this inquiry as the Coalition Against Youth Homelessness believes that any legislation that addresses the issues of homelessness needs to sit alongside any future ratification of the National Affordable Housing Act if there is to be any coherent strategy to address/reduce the impact and numbers of homelessness. Without a clear outline of what is to be incorporated within the National Affordable Housing Act, this submission may be limited and future provisions to review and update any legislation should be considered.

1. The principles that should underpin the provision of services to Australians who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

The following are recommended guiding principles that have been identified as part of homelessness strategies that have been developed both within the Victorian Homelessness Strategy² and also homelessness strategies across the UK and could be incorporated in legislation in relation to future development of homelessness strategies:-

- Provision of strategic direction – adoption of cross sector and cross departmental working partnerships;
- Common definition of homelessness – shared understanding of homelessness to capture the cause, effect, scale and nature of homelessness that can pervade on future housing provision to develop good practises that could ensure that competing needs amongst cross sector and/or cross departmental domains are tackled in a balanced and solution focussed way to reduce future homelessness;
- Housing provision – provision of access to safe and affordable housing that includes all people to have the opportunity to be a part of the community in a sustainable way;
- Information and advice – promotion and provision of timely information and advice at no cost to those who are seeking services;
- Sustainable and effective workforce – development of a well trained and appropriately remunerated staff within the sector ;

² Department of Human Services (2002) Victorian Homelessness Strategy – Directions For Change

- Eligibility and selection criteria- promotion of effective selection criteria in allocation of resources to those of greatest need based on individual merits and without automatic exclusions;
- Delivery of services - promote the delivery of services in a seamless, responsive and integrated way through multi agency and multi disciplinary planning. Build on existing partnerships between statutory and non government sectors delivering services based on agreed standards and targets that are progressively monitored and reviewed;
- Health and mental well being- ensure that all people who are homeless or who are at risk of homelessness have access to general and mental health services when required;
- Targeting specific groups- ensure support provision to those who are experiencing complex needs including:- prisoners; those affected by substance abuse issues; those experiencing domestic/family violence; rough sleepers; those who have a disability; acquired brain injury or who are intellectually disabled; and young people;
- Education- promotion of homelessness issues within the education system to prepare young people for independent living;
- Employment and training- promotion of initiatives and targeted support to assist homeless people into employment and training opportunities;
- Private rental sector- promote standards and tenancy conditions within the private rental sector;
- Income benefits- promotion of statutory benefits to be in line with current housing costs at a reasonable rate;
- Financial services- provision of financial advice services;³

2. The scope of any legislation with respect to related government initiatives in the areas of social inclusion and rights.

People experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of experiencing homelessness may find themselves denied access to fundamental services that are the foundation of being socially included. These will include access to affordable, safe, secure housing, mental and general health services, education, employment and training opportunities, income and social and recreational activities.

Incorporated into any future homelessness strategy would be measures that prevent social exclusion by providing direction that promotes social inclusion by the way services are delivered to centre around the people who are experiencing homelessness or at risk of experiencing homelessness.

Intentional joined up cross sector and cross departmental policies and initiatives to provide integrated service delivery responses with adequate resources could lead to:-

- the prevention and minimisation of episodes of homelessness,
- effective, safe and accessible provision for those who are homeless;
- support to independent living
- better outcomes for all people with housing needs both personally and socially;
- guarantee of service;
- improved satisfaction for workers who are responding to the needs of service users⁴

³ PSI Working Group on Homelessness (2004) Consultation document; Promoting Social Inclusion of Homeless People: Addressing the Causes and Effects of Homelessness in North Ireland

⁴ Department for Social Development (2007) Including the Homeless – A Strategy to promote the social inclusion of homeless people, and risk of becoming homeless, in Northern Ireland

Legislation should also take into account, as the preamble that exists within the SAAP Act 1994 does, the rights, that individuals are experiencing homelessness or at risk of experiencing homelessness but these could be better defined and articulated within new legislation.

Homelessness legislation should incorporate the principles of Human Rights legislation with a statement that could include that individuals and families should receive services that respect them as individuals through transparent provision of information; courtesy; confidentiality and the understanding of the issues confronting individuals. Services should, also be provided in a way that reflects fairness and equality.

One of the key human rights violations faced by young homeless persons or those at risk of homelessness is the right to adequate housing and support. Over the past two decades there has been a substantial decline in the availability of low cost rental housing in both public and private spheres despite increase in demand. Data from the last Census night in 2006 showed 105,000 individuals to be homeless. One, in every three, of those individuals counted were under the age of 18. It is a reasonable assumption that given the limitations of Census data the figure could considerably underestimate the youth homeless figure.

Unfortunately since 2006 the global financial crisis has further exacerbated the already existing housing crisis. One of the major problems causing homelessness and preventing its resolution is the difficulty young people have in gaining access to affordable housing. In the current housing market there are simply not enough affordable housing options suitable for young people. In addition, the lack of references and employment history, as well as discrimination based on age; often prevent young people from accessing what little housing is available. Whilst Department of Housing can help with bond loans, it will not give assistance if the rent being paid is more than 55 per cent of your income.

The below quote comes from a 19 year old female client who accesses Frontyard Youth Services located in the central business district of Melbourne, who has experienced several periods of homelessness over the past two years:

'In today's rental market finding a place that is cheap doesn't happen very often. Then there is the first month's rent, gas and electricity and the added expense of getting furniture and plates and cutlery and stuff. If someone can get all of this together then a lack of references will usually stop approval going through. I found this to be really difficult in my situation and the main reason I was able to get into the market was because one of my housemates had a reliable full time job and good references'.

The main option for young homeless people to have a semi permanent roof over their heads is to join the long waiting list for public housing or utilize rooming houses/ hostels. Sadly, for those young people accessing Frontyard's housing referral service (Melbourne Youth Support Service) sometimes the only option available for a young person is to stay in an environment that is unsafe, often surrounded by older individuals, with mental health and drug and alcohol problems who can pose a threat to personal safety and theft of belongings.

The Coalition Against Youth Homelessness maintains that young people have a fundamental right, not simply to shelter, but a right to *adequate* housing. Homelessness is not simply about a lack of housing, it is about the lack of connections with family, friends and the community and a lack of control over ones environment.

3. The role of legislation in improving the quality of services for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

The role of legislation specifically addressing homelessness should outline the necessity of support to those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Any legislation governing service provision and aimed at improving service provision quality for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, needs to recognize the complexities involved in people's journey's into homelessness.

Legislation needs to recognize that there is no "quick fix" in addressing the myriad of issues accompanying homelessness and for young people especially there needs to be the provision of targeted ongoing support rather than "short term episodic" supports which may alleviate presenting crisis issues but do little to identify and address in the long term those issues which have brought young people into the homelessness sector.

Legislation will need to recognize that a "one size fits all" mentality will not address or alleviate the burden on the homelessness sector. Simply people do not "find themselves" homeless. Rather multiple factors over varying periods of time will impact on the level and degree of people requiring assistance with factors such as family connection, support, drug and alcohol, mental health, age, family circumstances etc all playing a part on the type of assistance and for what length of time this will be required.

For young people within the homelessness service stream legislation will need to acknowledge that many young people do not have the support of family or extended family, have often disengaged with education and or training, have limited resources, and require targeted supports.

Another important consideration for young people entering the homelessness system which will require specialist ongoing supports are those young people who have had involvement with Child Protection, and Juvenile justice. These young people are often severely damaged by these experiences and often enter homelessness with few life skills and ability to function beyond a supported environment. These young people make up a small but nonetheless vulnerable subset within the service system requiring specialist supports.

Any legislation will need to consider a "whole of person" approach in addressing the range of issues. This approach recognizes supports need to fit in with a person's circumstances, need to be flexible in the range of delivery methods and need to be ongoing rather than episodic.

To counteract the increasing cost of homelessness to the community would be the development of integrated service models. The federal government's White Paper into homelessness notes that 'addressing homelessness will boost rates of participation in the economy and community. People who were homeless will be able to join the workforce and share in the prosperity of the nation'⁵

Zaretzky et al's key findings, through research conducted into the cost of homelessness programs found that 'homelessness programs have the potential to save over twice the value of capital and

⁵ The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness, Commonwealth of Australia, 2008

recurrent funding of homelessness programs on the basis of health and justice cost offsets alone'⁶. Their research compared the costs of homeless people's utilization of health and justice services in Western Australia, compared with the cost of providing those services to the general population.

Zaretsky et al concluded 'if homelessness programs were able to reduce the utilization of health and justice facilities by clients of homelessness programs down to population rates of utilization, the savings achieved would pay for homelessness programs themselves several times over'.⁷

An example of an integrated service model can be found in Victoria called Frontyard Youth Services and is auspiced by Melbourne Citymission. This is a colocated service delivery model for young people aged between 15 and 25 who are experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness. It is a unique model in that it incorporates federal, state, local, philanthropic and private sector funded programs. The services currently established at Frontyard are Melbourne Youth Support Service – statewide telephone information and referral service incorporating intensive short term case management services for young people predominantly seeking accommodation although comprehensive whole of person assessments are conducted with each young person who presents and referrals are made to respond to a wide ranging number of issues; Centrelink –responding to income; Young People's Health Service – provision of general, sexual and mental health responses; Youthlaw – responding to legal issues and advocacy; Reconnect – connecting young people back to family and education; Family Reconciliation and Mediation Program – brokerage service to assist young people to reconcile with family and themselves; Job Services Australia – assisting young people into employment and training.

Melbourne Citymission's Step Ahead Program⁸ based on the European Foyer Model, aims to 'wrap' services around young people to help them transition from dependence to independence connected to mainstream services. Case workers work directly with young people to integrate services including long term housing, personal support, life skills and links to education, training, employment and community connections. This focus on integration has yielded tangible, positive results with 98% of young people who participated in the program, successfully achieving sustainable independence within 18 months.

Another example of an integrated service response can be found through the development of the Youth Homelessness Alliance – Western. This integrated model focuses on the service coordination of a number of youth homelessness services located in the western metropolitan region of Melbourne. These services include Iramoo youth refuge; Latitude – formerly known as Baywest Youth Services and Essendon Youth Accommodation Group; Stopover Youth Services – Melbourne Citymission; Young Women's Crisis Service – Melbourne Citymission; Melbourne Youth Support Service- Melbourne Citymission; Western Region Accommodation Program – Melbourne

⁶ What the (Net) Cost to Government of Homelessness Programs, Zaretsky, Flatau and Brody, Australian Journal of Social Issues Vol.45 No2 WINTER 2008

⁸ Melbourne Citymission Step Ahead Case Practise Model, Dr Shelley Mallet, Melbourne Citymission (2007)

Citymission; Step Ahead program – Melbourne Citymission; Creating Connections – Melbourne Citymission; and Ladder Hoddle St.

This model has established the following principles that the group has remained consistent with since its inception in 2006. These principles include the following:-

A Guarantee of Service:

This is a commitment to engaging with and responding to every young person seeking assistance. It recognizes that whilst a service may not be able to provide a young person with immediate accommodation, it can always engage with that young person by responding to broader support needs and by explaining how the service system may be able to help. Services see it as their duty to provide this engagement on an individual level and at the young person's pace. Fundamental to the principle of a guarantee of service is the idea that the quality of an initial contact will often determine the level of that young person's ongoing engagement with the service system.

The Importance of Pathways:

This principle builds on the concept of a guarantee of service by acknowledging that a young person's entry into the service system must be backed by supportive guidance within the service system. Services believe that young people's pathways vary and services value the importance of flexibility in responding to individual needs. Successful pathways cannot simply be measured on the level of 'independence' a young person achieves or how quickly a service is able to exit that young person out of the service system. Young people must also be supported to achieve sustainable lifestyles of interdependence. By formalising existing relationships and mapping resources through the YHAW, services believe they will be in the best position to ensure that young people's transitions within the service system, whether in terms of accommodation or support, are appropriate and as smooth as possible.

Sharing of Resources and Relationship Building:

The YHAW will provide a formal structure for the sharing of knowledge and information between services. It will also allow for the better management of resources so that the capacity of all services to respond to young people is maximised. Through the increase in contact between services, relationships between these services will be enhanced. The YHAW therefore has great potential to avoid duplication and enhance service system efficiency whilst maintaining the integrity and unique expertise of all services in providing a personalised response to each young person seeking assistance.

Co-case Management and Supported Transition Pathway:

The YHAW will merely solidify the co-case management practices, which currently occur between services. Through the YHAW, these co-case management practices will be strengthened and expanded so that all young people, regardless of their needs, can benefit from a 'whole of YHAW' response. A common expectation for the follow up of referrals, where made, would also mean that young people would not 'disengage', 'get lost' or feel as though they were 'starting again' when

moving to another service. The YHAW therefore has the potential to provide a high level of continuity of care where a young person needs and wants to engage in co-case management.

One Comprehensive Dialogue:

Services recognise that in many instances, young people do not wish to 'tell their story' multiple times. The YHAW's service co-ordination will assist in avoiding this duplication and in limiting the 'story telling' to one comprehensive dialogue between support worker and young person. Furthermore, YHAW services aim to establish a common tool to guide this initial contact with the young person. This tool will be built on shared service values and will not act as a screening or prioritisation device. Emphasis will be placed on appropriately matching support and, where possible, accommodation to the individual rather than on identifying prohibitive and exclusionary so called 'risks factors' or 'complex needs'.

Location:

By strengthening the links between services in the western metropolitan region, the YHAW recognises the importance of connecting young people to local communities, whatever form those communities may take. Communities can create a sense of belonging and connectedness for a young person at risk of or experiencing homelessness. A service system based on 'catchments' rather than 'communities' and 'front doors' rather than 'multiple service access points' will be unable to achieve this outcome for young people. 'Multiple service access points' with strong local connections are vital given the transient nature of young people's experience of homelessness. Moreover, multiple and localised services allow for a flexible accommodation and support response appropriate to the individual and the local setting. This in turn promotes sustainable exit options for young people entering their local communities upon leaving the service system.

Exit Options:

YHAW's comprehensive and coordinated service delivery will best prepare a young person, where appropriate and possible, for exit into accommodation outside the homelessness service system. To ensure the best possible outcomes for young people who are faced with the current reality of very few sustainable exit options, comprehensive living skills support is required whilst the young person remains in the system. Through its sharing of resources and co-case management strategies, the YHAW will be in a strong position to meet this need.

Our experience has shown that addressing the needs of disadvantaged and marginalised young people aged 16 – 25 years offers the strongest opportunity to break the homelessness and poverty cycle. Homelessness is often intergenerational and many young people have been raised within this context. Providing intensive, episodic crisis support and access to services which provide a pathway out of homelessness have positive and sustainable benefits as they transition into adulthood.

Young people characteristically have strong goals, are resilient, courageous and determined to make their own way. They are able to articulate their needs, make choices and take action to develop core life skills. When provided with appropriate, co-ordinated support, they are empowered to move from dependence and isolation to independence and connection with the community. In

short, provision of effective support and services for 16 – 25 year olds provides the best window of opportunity to create a positive future.

4. The effectiveness of existing legislation and regulations governing homelessness services in Australia and overseas.

Aim of SAAP

(2)

The overall aim of SAAP is to provide transitional supported accommodation and related support services, in order to help people who are homeless to achieve the maximum possible degree of self-reliance and independence. Within this aim the goals are:

(a)

to resolve crisis; and

(b)

to re-establish family links where appropriate; and

(c)

to re-establish a capacity to live independently of SAAP.

In response to the aim of SAAP and any legislation that is created to respond to homelessness, needs to consider whether, the resolving of a crisis is going to achieve a maximum possible degree of self reliance? For example, how do young people who have recently left home 're-establish' a capacity that has never been apparent before? The aim of SAAP needs to be seriously reconsidered in terms of some target groups.

There are a number of countries across the world that have incorporated homelessness legislation into or alongside that of established housing acts such as Housing (Scotland) Act (2001); Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003. There have also been additions made to the UK Act and examples of including homelessness legislation incorporated into housing acts in Northern Ireland.

The Scottish Government has also developed the Code of Guidance on Homelessness⁹ which provides guidance on legislation, policies and practises to prevent and resolve homelessness. It would be beneficial if a similar document was developed nationwide to provide consistency across states and territories to respond to addressing homelessness.

5. The applicability of existing legislative and regulatory models used in other community service systems, such as disability services, aged care and child care, to the homelessness sector.

Development of consistent homelessness strategies should include the partnership and cooperation of all areas including community care, justice, mental health, disability, aged care and child care services.

⁹ Scottish Executive, Edinburgh (2005) Code of Guidance on Homelessness – Guidance on legislation, policies and practises to prevent and resolve homelessness

Homelessness legislation should clearly define the where current legislation in other areas within community service systems overlap to ensure that all people who are experiencing homelessness or are at risk of homelessness do fall between gaps and are able to access to available resources to them in all systems. In the past SAAP services have provided the safety net, or the 'dumping ground' to other community services systems that have not been able to provide appropriate responses within their own systems with the expectation that homelessness service providers will respond with far less resources available to them.

Accreditation systems for housing and homelessness providers such as those that have been developed in Victoria that have been based on similar systems used within disability and aged care should be incorporated nationwide to ensure consistency.

Housing registration systems such as those that have been developed within Victoria could also be applied to a nationwide standard.

We thank the House Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth the opportunity for being able to forward this submission with the hope that it will be considered as part of the inquiry made into future legislative changes in relation to homelessness.

**Nada Vindis,
Coalition Against Youth Homelessness**

The Coalition Against Youth Homelessness is made up of a group of professionals who have worked and continue to work in the homelessness sector and related community services with individual members having thirty years of direct service delivery experience. Members of the Coalition Against Youth Homelessness that have contributed to the preparation of this submission include the following:-

Nada Vindis
Brett McDonnell
Vanessa Virgato
Giancarlo (Charlie) Volpe
Jodi Brown
Carol Tomnay
Andrea Hutton
Lisa O'Brien
Ryan Coonan
Rhonda Collins