

City of Melbourne's Response to the House of Representatives Standing Committee inquiry into homelessness legislation.

August 2009

Introduction

The City of Melbourne's *Homelessness Framework 2007 - 2009* was endorsed by Council in February 2007. The key objective of the *Framework* is *creating sustainable pathways out of homelessness*.

In February 2008 Council resolved to form a strategic alliance with the Victorian State Government for the implementation of a Supportive Housing/Housing First model to be developed in Melbourne.

This paper sets out the City of Melbourne's response to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth inquiry into homelessness legislation. It is understood that the findings of the inquiry will inform the replacement of the existing Commonwealth homelessness legislation. The response is based on the endorsed Council framework, Homelessness Research projects, funded programs and service sector support undertaken by Council over a number of years.

The City of Melbourne welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of new legislation which will assist in creating the conditions which address and solve homelessness.

Our response is divided into five main sections covering the principles, scope, role, effectiveness and applicability of the legislation.

SECTION 1: Principles to underpin provision of services to Australians who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

The City of Melbourne has identified that the overarching principle driving future policy directions and new legislation related to homelessness should be based on the view that *homelessness is unacceptable in Australian society and that everyone has a right to safe, affordable and appropriate housing*.

The City of Melbourne Homelessness Framework 2007 – 2009 is based on a Human Rights approach and identifies four key principle areas:

Council Responsibility

Leadership and co ordination comprising a whole of Council approach and collaboration with and support to organisations, other levels of government, business, the community and homeless people;

Capital City

Supporting the concept of a city which is open twenty four hours a day, seven days a week, including the availability of responses to homelessness;

Rights - Based Approach

Services and facilities that are inclusive of all citizens, encouraging participation, building on people's strengths and knowledge of their own lives and respecting all people's rights and dignity; and

Responding to Diversity

Valuing early intervention approaches; support services that build sustainable pathways out of homelessness. This can mean recognising the changing needs and diversity of all homeless people.

It is suggested that these key principles be considered in developing and framing the new legislation which will have a significant impact on provision of services and supports to people experiencing homelessness across Australia.

Section 2: Scope of legislation with respect to related government initiatives.

The new homelessness legislation needs to be developed and framed in a manner which ensures that the outcomes of the legislation are effective in ensuring a robust service system and the legislation is complimentary across related government initiatives (and departments).

The Commonwealth Government Homelessness White Paper has opened up a much needed dialogue on the future direction of homelessness services and supports.

In order to effectively tackle homelessness in Australia, a system of co-existence and expansion of the homeless specific support service and mainstream services is required. The development of new services delivery models will be nationally co-ordinated and developed but undertaken in conjunction with state and local government to ensure local perspective is still central to policy making and service delivery.

New legislation which is robust but also framed in a manner which supports development and delivery of a diverse and flexible service system is crucial to the success of the Commonwealth Homelessness plans and initiatives over the next ten years.

Relationship between Federal, State and Local Governments

A crucial aspect of the Commonwealth homelessness reform agenda is improved collaborative relationships between Federal, State and Local Governments. The national Government needs to take the lead in fostering and facilitating development of this new era of collaborative government relationships across Australia.

The development of new Commonwealth homelessness legislation provides an opportunity to create the legislative conditions which will ensure that new collaborative relationships are established across all levels of Government and the service sector.

These new collaborative relationships will assist the delivery of homelessness solutions which are effective and sustainable and foster the possibility of ending homelessness.

Research undertaken in Melbourne and elsewhere indicates that the service system needs to be more flexible, accessible especially after hours and on weekends, be more co ordinate and involve consumer participation.

Consideration and inclusion of these aspects in framing of new homelessness legislation will be a key part of ensuring effective services and supports are available.

Flexibility of support

For those who are homeless, providing support for as long as required is critical to the success of moving people out of homelessness.

The level of support will naturally change over time. The aim to slowly reduce follow up over time will ensure clients transferring to private/public sector rentals will have sustained tenancies, reducing the likelihood of repeated homelessness episodes.

It is also clear that the level, type and content of support required needs to be flexible and fluid. Many if not most clients need long term support that changes with them.

Consumer Participation

Regardless of what approach/path is taken for tackling homelessness in Australia, the involvement of those people who are currently or recently homeless is crucial in ensuring that proposed plans and responses fit well with homeless people.

The involvement of peer education programs such as that operated by the Council to Homeless Persons in Victoria provides a significant contribution in enabling agencies, planners and policy developers to have direct input from homeless consumers.

Legislation which ensures consumer participation in the service system and response will be valuable. Participation of people who have experienced homelessness in the framing of new legislation through a peer education program should be a key part of the review and framing of new legislation.

Section 3: The role of legislation in improving quality of services for people who are homeless.

Review and development of new homelessness legislation provides an opportunity for inclusion of requirements for service quality and standards and accreditation. Legislation which ensures that service responses to homelessness are inclusive, equitable, respectful and coordinated would greatly assist people experiencing homelessness. The establishment of indicators, measures and effective monitoring systems would benefit consumers and service providers.

Rooming house residents make up a high proportion of the homeless population however, very little is known about the needs and aspirations of this group.

A key priority of action for the tertiary sector is to conduct extensive research into both the demographics of this group and their needs and aspirations. Once we have this greater understanding we need to work to proactively improve outcomes and support for people living in rooming/boarding houses or similar insecure tenancies such as caravan parks.

In partnership with State Governments, Federal Government funding is required to support the retention and upgrading of existing rooming/boarding houses ensuring all facilities comply with all building, planning, health and the other regulatory requirements.

It would be valuable if the review of Commonwealth homelessness legislation considered how new legislation will impact and improve outcomes for rooming house residents. For example it would be valuable if Commonwealth legislation created the conditions which ensure that rooming/boarding houses have an appropriate registration and regulation system in place that will ensure the safety, amenity and tenancy rights of residents.

It is also critical that legislation ensures that homelessness and general support services are actively engaged with rooming/boarding house residents.

When developing a legislative system including a range of targets for homelessness services it is important to ensure this work is undertaken in partnership with all States, Local Governments and local communities.

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

The City of Melbourne has limited ability to assess the effectiveness of existing homelessness legislation compared to overseas legislation. However from knowledge of the Australian homelessness service sector and research undertaken with people experiencing homelessness in Melbourne, it is clear that new legislation needs to focus on provision of services in a co-ordinated way, preferably linked to housing, is

crucial. The elements of flexibility of service provision extended access hours, availability of immediate support and less time limitations would assist people experiencing homelessness.

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

The review of current homelessness legislation and development of the new legislation will benefit from comparison with the legislative framework governing other sectors such as disability, aged care and child care services. A stronger focus on service quality, accreditation, licensing and standards is crucial in ensuring effective service outcomes.

Further Action

As a capital city, Melbourne has been involved in housing and homelessness for many years and has made a strong commitment to creating sustainable pathways out of homelessness.

In particular, Council has undertaken a considerable amount of homelessness research over the past eighteen months and is willing to be an active participant and contributor to discussions and initiatives which have a focus on developing lasting solutions to address homelessness.
