

SUBMISSION:**Community Housing Tasmania Limited**

Dr Robert k Murfet PhD (UNSW)

To the House Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth

Inquiry into homelessness legislation**Another Tasmanian Perspective.**

This submission has gone through many iterations with the criticism softened further each time. But the truth is that nothing much has been done for the homeless in Tasmania for the last ten years. Plans and promises have been made and large amounts of money have been set aside but for the people sleeping rough this has made no significant difference. There are more people sleeping rough now than there were a year ago. Indeed, there are systemic problems that will not be fixed over night but will take years to overcome. The Tasmanian government is preparing yet another plan to be finalized by December 2009.

It is said that there were 2,507 people that were homeless on the night of the 2006 census in Tasmania with 385 of those sleeping rough. The figure for those sleeping rough is not reliable as it is based on modeling from the rest of Australia, it was carried out in the middle of winter when those sleeping rough are harder to find and as far as I can gather, the data collectors did not go to the "scary places" where people sleep rough. At the time of the Tasmanian Budget Estimates 2009, there were 3,007 households on the public housing waiting list, up 273 from the previous year. Of these there were 330 in Category 1 indicating that they were in urgent need of a dwelling and at risk of becoming homeless. The small number of homeless shelters in Hobart are turning away more people, providing just a blanket. The financial crisis and job losses are likely to exacerbate this situation.

However, as the result of an association with a place called "No Bucks" that Wesley in the City has set up that serves coffee and food at lunch time to homeless people, I have been able to gather evidence from the coalface on the homeless. (See my qualifications and experience below). I now have a list of sorts of places where people sleep rough in Hobart. However, a significant number sleep in cars and others in squats so the list is constantly changing and the number also changes.

Before turning to specific comments on the terms of reference it is important to be aware of a number of facts. Tasmanian Government continues to promise that it will halve the number of people sleeping rough by the end of 2010. As time passes it would appear that this is a promise that is impossible to keep. This promise was made in 2008 and anecdotal evidence from the coalface suggests that that figure has increased by as much as ten percent since then.

The challenge of reducing the number of homeless and meeting the targets set is probably underestimated by the Tasmanian and Commonwealth governments. The problems relate to

major systemic issues that have to be overcome before the number of homeless persons can be reduced.

Mental Health

Evidence from the coalface in Hobart, suggests that up to two thirds of those sleeping rough have a mental health problem or are drug impacted. There are known cases where homeless people have been locked down over night in forensic mental health services. There is also a network that warns of troublesome cases that are then excluded from the shelters. Shelters do this because they cannot cope with all of the homeless that come to them and probably pick the easiest to manage. Furthermore, just putting a roof over the heads of such people is just not going to work. They need to be in supported accommodation and cared for by professional mental health staff. Where will these additional mental health staff come from and how will they be trained and in place within the given timeframe? The health system is already under pressure in Tasmania.

Unlike NSW, there does not seem to be teams of street workers in Tasmania that can get along side homeless youth and other homeless people to gain their trust and then get them to move into transitional housing and finally into more long term accommodation. While there is a plan to have new response teams in Tasmania, where will they come from and how will they be trained and will they be prepared to go to scary places late at night to find the homeless? A lot of work will have to go into this before it becomes a reality.

Supply Side Issues

Using terminology drawn from economics, the “demand side” issues have been refined to the last detail with many reports written and plans made. We know why the homeless problem has arisen, research has been done on the different cohorts, the needs have been defined and detailed plans made. There are teams of social policy people working on these issues.

However, there is lack of people working on the “supply side” issues, that is, the building of facilities, infrastructure and dwellings. Indeed the skills and experience in this area have been allowed to run down over the last decade. This is having an even greater impact on the construction of affordable social housing. Tasmania does not have a planning department. Nobody knows how many residential lots there are available at any given time. A housing policy was promised by the government recently but never came to fruition. There are very few government officers that have any skills or experience in these areas. The new committee of non government people advising the government on its homeless plan to be ready by December 2009 has no supply side representative on it.

So we have the example of the highly publicized “Place to Call Home” centre at 279 Liverpool Street, Hobart. It is to house 47 people including a significant proportion of homeless. It is said by the Minister responsible to be “on track” to be completed by March 2010. However, a development application has not yet been submitted to the Hobart City Council. On that basis, the planning process and building approval is likely to take another three months to achieve. Past experience in this sort of work indicates that is likely to take a further 18 months work before this building is ready for occupation by homeless people. On that basis it is more likely to be completed in mid 2011. (For those who don't know this site it is adjacent to the Pickled Frog Hotel.) The Social Inclusion Unit is no longer in control of it and it is a bit unclear just who is

running with it now.

Funding

The Commonwealth and State governments have promised \$28m towards the homeless problem in Tasmania. Of this \$10m will be spent on the "Place to Call Home" project. That leaves \$18m which is far from adequate to meet the promises made regarding the homeless in Tasmania.

One of the priorities recently announced in Tasmania is the provision of 100 units of accommodation under the Same House Different Landlord Program to enable people experiencing homelessness to move directly into long term accommodation. The question is, are these in addition to the dwellings built under the National Economic Stimulus Package and the other social housing built by the Tasmanian Government and how can they be identified as additional units? Where will the additional \$25m come from for these new dwellings?

The Wellbeing of the Tasmanian People

The social statistics on almost every key indicator of wellbeing shows Tasmania at the bottom of the list of states in Australia. Whether it is poverty, employment, mental health or education Tasmania is at the bottom of the list. A paper by the Australian government library shows that Braddon and Lyons have higher levels of poverty than any other electorate in Australia. Why is this so in a state that could be quite wealthy? As far as I am aware no serious analysis has been carried on why this is so. There are a lot of theories, but they do not come to much. The most likely reason is a lack of innovation and leadership. Indeed it could be argued that successive State and Commonwealth governments have failed in their duty of care when it comes to the wellbeing of the Tasmanian people.

When you consider the social well being of the Tasmanian people and the level of poverty, it becomes clear why people in Tasmania are homeless and many are sleeping rough. These are entrenched systemic problems that will not be fixed in the short term. Hence significantly reducing the number of homeless in Tasmania is a major challenge. The Commonwealth government should put more effort into Tasmania in terms of its research and policy resources and help this jurisdiction out of its poor welfare circumstances. The Tasmanian members and senators should focus more on improving circumstances in Tasmania rather than on the problems of the rest of the world.

I have tried to set out the facts in a non political way for whatever the outcome of the forthcoming state election in March 2010, little will change in the short term for people sleeping rough in Tasmania.

Given the context set out above I now turn to make comments on each of the terms of reference.

Terms of Reference

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

There is little more that needs to be said on this issue after reports such as "A Road Home" and others regarding the principles surrounding homelessness. Suffice is to say that it is a basic human right that a person has adequate and safe housing. Some people in the community clearly need considerable support to maintain that status.

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

(Being a specialist in planning, housing and the housing affordability I have little new to contribute and will leave others to discuss this issue.)

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

Legislation is only one of a range of tools necessary to eliminate homelessness.

The initial policy initiative must be to separate homelessness from a range of other social issues. Most importantly the mental health services must give adequate care and accommodation to people suffering psychotic and neurotic mental illness. It must also provide support for those that have been damaged by drug use and the mentally disabled. This is not the case in Tasmania at this time. It is my estimate that if this were the case the number of homeless people in Tasmania would be reduced by up to 30 percent.

Secondly, if affordable social housing was made available to all low income households that can manage their own affairs, the number of homeless would be reduce in Tasmania by a further 30 percent.

Unfortunately the supply of affordable social housing by the Tasmanian government has not kept pace with the other States. Indeed over the last five years an insignificant number of social housing units have been constructed. There are three reasons for this. Firstly the previous Commonwealth government, starve social housing of adequate funds. Secondly the Tasmanian government has failed to nurture and fund true community housing organizations that draw on community capital. As far as I am aware, there are no specialist housing not for profits based in Tasmania that have received funding. This form of housing has resulted in thousands of new dwellings in other jurisdictions. The other agencies such as the Salvos and Anglicare are more concerned with their core welfare businesses rather than building houses and, so they should be given the stress they are under. The third problem is the lack of supply side skills and experience as described above.

If the two issues outlined above were resolved then the homeless populating would be cut to about one third of the present number. This would just leave the ones that are not mentally ill or lack the necessarily funds to house themselves, but just lack the capacity to manage themselves and their financial affairs. This last group is relatively easy to handle and if they were the only ones in need of help, homelessness could be brought under control.

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

The existing legislation applicable to the homeless obviously has a series of inadequacies otherwise there would not be so many people sleeping rough in Australia. The SAAP legislation is too reactive. The analogy of the cliff is useful here. The current SAAP legislation helps homeless people once they have fallen over the cliff by applying band aids to them. It would be far better to find ways to prevent them falling off in the first place. The other problem is that the current legislation assumes that there are sufficient SAAP places to meet the need and be regulated and that if there is not enough others will set up and take the money on offer from the Commonwealth. This is not the case in Tasmania. For example there is only one shelter for homeless men in crisis in Hobart, being Bethlehem House, which on most nights is full. This situation will not be resolved by refining the SAAP legislation.

So two further things need to be done, in terms of the legislative framework. First there needs to be a Homeless Services Act as there is in Britain and in Scotland that incorporates a far wider set of requirements and services needed to overcome homelessness. The SAAP Act may only need minor modifications as a subordinate piece of legislation to a Homeless Services Act. And finally the all legislation associated with homelessness shall then need to be amended and refined to support a Homeless Services Act to lead to the resolution of the problems outlined above.

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."*

(Being a specialist in planning, housing and the housing affordability I have little new to contribute and will leave others to discuss this issue.)

Dr Robert K Murfet

Dr Robert Murfet is a partner of Community Housing Tasmania Limited. He has a PhD in Applied Science from the University of NSW in the field of urban planning and psychology. He taught at UNSW for 5 years. He moved to Canberra and worked with the Commonwealth Public Accounts Committee for a number of years and then played a pivotal role in the establishment of the Defence Housing Authority, a GBE responsible for managing housing for 24,000 Defence families across Australia. He was responsible for large residential developments in each of the States and the Territories and approved the construction of thousands of residential dwellings. In 1996 he became a private consultant in urban planning, strategic planning and land economics. In 1998, Dr Murfet and a colleague wrote the Concilium Report, the largest report on homelessness funded by the Commonwealth in the last ten years. That report sought to develop a sophisticated statistical model to predict the level of homelessness in regions across Australia. Dr Murfet was the Chairman of CHASACT (Community Housing Advisory Service ACT) for a period of time and was on the inaugural board of Community Housing Canberra Limited. In 2007, after 30 or so years working in Canberra, he returned to his home state and lives in Hobart where he is working on a range of planning and housing projects.

Community Housing Tasmania Ltd

TAS 7006

14 August 2009