St Vincent de Paul Society

good works

Inquiry into Homelessness Legislation

The House of Representatives Standing Committee

on Family, Community, Housing and Youth

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Executive Summary

The St Vincent de Paul Society ("the Society") understands housing as a basic human right. The provision of housing and the removal of structural causes of homelessness are core to our 'good works'. The Society act to abolish homelessness.

The Society understands homelessness through an integrated mode of service delivery. It is this holistic view of homelessness that enables possible solutions beyond the current confines of SAAP.

The Society recognises that by the time a person enters SAAP they are already in massive crisis and have suffered trauma. SAAP acts as an indicator of systemic failure. It does not however follow that SAAP as a provider of crisis accommodation is itself a failure. The Society seeks a continued commitment to SAAP or a similar funding program to provide crisis accommodation, but with the removal of time limits.

The Society seeks to break the funding nexus between accommodation and services. This is not to suggest that services and accommodation cannot be collocated, but rather that services can stretch beyond current physical locations and provide a continuum of support services from prevention to independence meeting the objectives of the White Paper.

Background

Since the foundation of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Paris in 1833 housing has been central the Society's 'good works'. The first work of charity was a delivery of firewood to a person living in substandard housing. By today's standard this person lived in tertiary homelessness. The Society presently provides around 2,350 beds each night around Australia to people who would otherwise be experiencing homelessness.

In Australia our 40,000 members and volunteers work hard to ensure that people enjoy the right to housing and have the resources to avoid entering homelessness. The Society affirms that "everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including …. housing … and necessary social services…"[1]. Access to decent, safe, tenured housing is a fundamental human right. Housing is more than just bricks and mortar it is also the foundation upon which communities are built, whereby people can support each other. While the Society provides crisis accommodation for those experiencing homelessness and paths out of homelessness, we understand the provision of crisis accommodation is a demonstration of a systemic failure. The Society seeks to abolish all forms of poverty, including homelessness.

The Society's organisational documents inform our response to homelessness. "….the Society constantly strives for renewal, adapting to changing world conditions. It seeks to be ever aware of the changes that occur in human society and the new types of poverty that may be identified or anticipated."[2] The Society seeks to animate communities that encourage

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[1] United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Art 25.

[2] St Vincent de Paul Society 2002 *The Rule*, Part 1 1.6.

active participation, co-operation and innovation, where all adults and children are valued and included.

The decline in public and social housing for low-income families and households means more people are both entering homelessness and failing to attain independence. This failure represents a serious deficit in our socio-economic structures rather than an individual deficit. The Society looks to work in partnership to increase national investment in public and social housing for low-income families and households [3].

The principles

The Society is genuinely interested in the response of people experiencing homelessness to the principles. We believe that principles suggested in the Green Paper like "joined-up policy" or "evidence-based policy" have some serious limitations in terms of accessibility and clarity. It is expected that responses would include "respectful and supportive relationships in our communities" and "that the abolition of homelessness is possible in Australia".

The Society proposes the following principles:
1. Housing is a human right
2. Abolition of institutional homelessness is our main focus
3. Social Inclusion is a mode of practice and a sign post of achievement
4. Supply, supply, supply
5. Engagement through respectful and supportive relationships in our communities
6. Social and public housing to be increased
7. Crisis accommodation demonstrates systemic failures
8. Joined-up policy across Government from prevention to independence

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[3] St Vincent de Paul Society 2007 *Don't Dream, It's Over.*

9. Evidence-based policy requires research and advocacy
10. Targets are set to reduce homelessness

Social inclusion and rights.

Social Inclusion

The government's social inclusion agenda provides a meaningful context in which this social issue can be addressed. We believe that, with the right approaches, institutional homelessness can be abolished.

Professor Ilan Katz of the UNSW Social Policy Research Centre observed recently that:

"...the term social inclusion, while a lot warmer and fuzzier than social exclusion, lacks the connotation of exclusionary forces. It therefore implies a much stronger policy focus on helping the excluded to participate in mainstream society, without examining what it is about that society that excluded them in the first place."

The Society strongly urges that any serious approach to social inclusion must take heed of the structural causes of social exclusion, of which homelessness is both a symptom and an exacerbating element.

Policy is usually presented as a *fait accompli* cooked up in the rarefied atmosphere inhabited by those whose lives and learnings are alien and alienating to the people whose lives will be affected.

There is often an incredible presumption that people are incapable of analysing their own situation. This presumption carries with it a handy rejection of the notion of actually providing resources to people to allow them to articulate their analyses and proposed solutions. And yet the greatest social

reforms have been wrought by grass-roots movements in the history of Australian social policy.

A Human Rights Approach

Human rights are derived from the inherent dignity of people. Human rights must be respected, protected and fulfilled. All six human rights international treaties have been signed and ratified by Australia. That imposes responsibilities and obligations to respect fundament human rights, to protect people from human rights violations, and to fulfill human rights law.

The Government's response to homelessness must be driven from a human rights approach. Government must ensure that everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of themselves and of their family, including housing and necessary social services. Service delivery principles should include treating people with dignity and respect, equality and non-discrimination; give primacy to people's voices and empathy; adopt a whole-of-person approach; provide empowerment and meaningful participation; and engage in systemic advocacy and public education.

While primary homelessness is a clear and undeniable human rights violation, it should be noted that secondary and tertiary homelessness are also67 n violations. Rooming houses do not protect the right to adequate housing[4].

Legislation to improve the quality of services

In the foreword of the Homelessness White Paper, The Prime Minister and the Minister for Housing remind us that the White Paper "...will help services to

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[4] Caroline Adler and Amy Barry-Macaulay, *Rooming Houses are NOT Adequate Houses,* Parity, Volume 22, Issue 5.

provide people who become homeless with the full range of support that they need – rather than leaving individuals to try and navigate a complex system." This can only be achieved through proper legislation.

Such legislation must respond to homelessness through the three strategies established by the White Paper on Homelessness:

1. *Turning off the tap*: services will intervene early to prevent homelessness

2. *Improving and expanding services*: services will be more connected and responsive to achieve sustainable housing, improve economic and social participation and end homelessness for their clients

3. *Breaking the cycle*: people who become homeless will move quickly through the crisis system to stable housing with the support they need so that homelessness does not recur.

We encourage the Federal Government to work with other tiers of government in legislating responses to abolish homelessness. Legislation must respond to both prevention for those 'at risk' of experiencing homelessness and independence for those experiencing homelessness. To solve issues of prevention and independence, accommodation and support services must be separated. This does not mean that they cannot be collocated, but is designed to encourage inter-linking of services, without destroying the integrity of individual services. By inter-linking services it is hoped that people may have their often complex needs met by inter-linked services that are inter-twined with accommodation.

Effectiveness of existing legislation

SAAP

The St Vincent de Paul Society runs many SAAP funded services, and readily acknowledges that SAAP may provide some paths to independence; however, it does not fulfill a preventative function.

It can be argued that SAAP has not fulfilled its intentions or ideals. Three main factors of SAAP V were:

I)   Increase involvement in early intervention and prevention strategies;

II)   Provide better assistance to people who have a number of support needs; and,

III)   Provide ongoing assistance to ensure stability for clients post crisis.

SAAP never had the capacity to roll out the above ideals. Funding levels have dropped in real terms, and the evaluation of SAAP IV in 2004 stated a 15% increase in funding was required for SAAP services to meet existing demand and a 40% increase to work more effectively for people experiencing homelessness[5].

By the time people have reached a SAAP accommodation service they are already in massive crisis and have suffered considerable trauma from their experiences. Greater focus needs to be directed towards prevention and recognising which people are 'at risk' of homelessness in addition to those already experiencing it, particularly children. Research suggests that if you experience homelessness as a child, you are more likely to experience it as

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[5] Erebus Consulting 2004 *National Evaluation of SAAP IV* - Final Report.

an adult[6]. Preventing a child from entering homelessness may not just stop a childhood experience of homelessness, but also an adult experience of homelessness.

SAAP (by what ever form it takes) should focus on providing accommodation with joined up service delivery. There needs to be a greater understanding of crisis, beyond the in-flexible context of existing time limits of 3 months for crisis accommodation, and 6-12 months for medium term accommodation. Greater collaboration is required between SAAP services and mainstream providers. The most 'at risk' times of a SAAP client's journey are just before and just after leaving the service, for which very little provision currently exists. The Society's services in NSW have been providing to selected recipients support services for two years post accommodation. It is reported that this effort has stopped people needing to re-present at accommodation services.

SAAP may fail at reducing homelessness at a societal level but is still the best existing means of engaging people experiencing homelessness. A commitment is needed for retaining the knowledge and settings of SAAP. Also, the delivery of SAAP services involves a large workforce of skilled and dedicated individuals. The welfare of that workforce must be considered in the implementation of any change.

Too many SAAP services are grounded (and restricted) by the properties they manage. Often, clients will be referred to or access services that are not necessarily appropriate for their needs, simply because the more appropriate service has no accommodation available. By separating services and accommodation people may access the most appropriate service regardless of a particular facility's capacity. In this way, services can function and be

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[6] Institute of Child Protection Studies Australian Catholic University 2007 *Finding their way home: Children's experiences of homelessness*, pg 104.

funded holistically from prevention through to independence. 'Floating' support workers can deliver a tailored support package to clients that utilises a pool of 'SAAP properties'.

Homelessness beyond SAAP

It comes as little surprise to the Society that ABS data indicates around 19% of people experiencing homelessness are housed in supported accommodation[7]. Our members and services help all categories of people experiencing homelessness, including the plain majority outside of SAAP. Identification of those in need and their subsequent linking to gateways is a community task. Our members (and like-minded other groups) can identify need at a regional, local and personal level. The Society recommends expanding the "outreach" capacity of present services (to reduce the possibility of homelessness) and creating new "outreach" services that are not tied by locational or associative constraints but rather established in a manner that enables engagement with those most in need. Schools should also form part of this inter-linked response.

A member of the St Vincent de Paul Society said "You may say, keep them in their present accommodation … it is not always so straightforward."

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>
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The reality is that even with sufficient case management a person can be forced out of untenured property. Common examples include development of

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[7] Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006) *Counting the Homeless 2001 – ABS Catalogue No 2050.0*, pg2.

tenanted buildings and sale of caravan parks[8]. Even government policy can force people into an experience of homelessness. Examples include 8 week non payment periods, prison discharge and hospital discharge.

Centrelink

There is of course a great deal of legislation concerning the operation of social security payment and support through Centrelink. The Government should review the impact of such legislation on people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness.

A recent study conducted by the Society[9] revealed that the Government should focus on inclusion rather than participation of Australians experiencing unemployment and homelessness. This could be done by recognising activities like house-seeking as equal or greater than established participation activities. The Government could also remove punitive measures so that Australians experiencing unemployment and homelessness do not have to operate in a culture of fear when dealing with Centrelink and employment services.

Housing Associations

The Society is certain that Housing Associations will play a significant part in the response to homelessness. In a number of states the Society is exploring involvement in various affordable housing associations. However the Society is mindful to ensure the efficacy of housing legislation to deliver good outcomes for most disadvantaged, homeless population. The Society is concerned that because housing associations receive government funding and are expected to leverage additional funding to develop and 'grow' more

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[8] St Vincent de Paul Society 2008 *Residents at Risk.*

[9] St Vincent de Paul Society 2008 *Welfare to Work, Centrelink and Homelessness*

housing, their housing stock tends to be skewed towards a more profitable group in the low income community. The Society believes that there is a place for enshrining in legislation, a requirement that a percentage of this stock is allocated to most disadvantaged group.

Research and Evidence based Policy

The Society supports the need for evidence based policy. This requires greater investment in both qualitative and quantities research including longitudinal studies. The bulk of existing research on homelessness is often nothing more than program reviews linked to funding – a consequence of an obsessive focus on procedure and quantitative modeling ahead of solutions. This is reflected in the White Paper. Australia has many great homelessness and housing experts. Research should be promoted with adequate funding and resources to explore gaps in existing knowledge. Possible gaps or further original research is required in the following areas:

- Prevention and possible determinants of homelessness;
- Social participation and marginalisation;
- Housing options;
- Service delivery gaps;
- Chronic homelessness;
- Longitudinal study regarding case goals (involving various sectors);
- Reducing incarceration/hospitalisation discharge rates into an experience of homelessness;
- Churn or 'revolving door syndrome'; and
- Homeless population data (see: ABS *Counting the Homeless* recommendations.)

The Society notes that it, like other charities, holds a significant evidence base. For example data from our crisis accommodation in Hobart shows that in this regional area turn back rates over summer are around 40 men a month, but this grows to around 100 men over winter. Such important evidence can

be used with existing research to drive regional responses to reduce institutional homelessness[10].

Applicability of existing models used in other areas.

The Society recognises and uses existing models from other community service systems, such as disability services, aged care and child care, to assist in delivering homelessness services. For example people aged over 70 years are presently assisted by the Society through aged care facilities. Assessments can be offered to people aged under 70 years who have health issues that would be best met through a service specifically designed to meet their age and health care needs. More needs to be done to allow older Australians experiencing homelessness, but who may not meet present requirements, to access aged care.

Final Statement

We commend the government for taking a strong policy stance on the issue of homelessness. We have no doubts as to the sincerity of this commitment. We strongly urge that legislation be framed that entrenches the notion of homelessness as a human rights violation and that people experiencing homelessness be provided with the right to properly determine the social solutions to the structural problems that have intersected with their lives. We also urge that other government policy and practice be brought into alignment with such legislation, particularly in the areas of social security and housing legislation as well as in the area of policing and custodial practices.

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[10] Justin Griffin, *Reducing Unmet Demand in SAAP: Pointers from the Evidences base*; May 2008 Vol 24 Issue 4.