



Submission to the Estimates and Financial Operations Committee

Re: Inquiry into the financial administration of homelessness services in Western Australia

Explorability Inc. would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to provide comment on the financial administration of homelessness services in Western Australia.

Explorability Inc.

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Introduction

Explorability Inc. (Explorability) is a non-profit, community organisation that provides individualised advocacy services to people with disability, their families and carers, across Western Australia. Any person who identifies as having an intellectual, psychiatric, cognitive, neurological sensory and / or physical disability, as defined by the Western Australian Disability Services Act 1993, is eligible to access our advocacy services.

Explorability has six years of experience in advocating for the individual rights of people with disability, including two years of experience, from January 2020 to January 2022, providing Individual Advocacy Outreach Programs in the Perth Metropolitan and Wheatbelt regions. The Outreach programs involved a partnership approach which included linkage with services such as St Patrick's Community Support Centre, South Lake Ottey Family and Community Centre, Ruah Centre, and the Tranby House. The Outreach Programs enabled connection with individuals who were vulnerable, isolated, and often transient, and were not typically linked with other supports and services.

Explorability recognises that homelessness is complex, requiring a multifaceted and personalised service approach. As acknowledged by the Honourable Simone McGurk in the All Paths Lead to a Home Action Plan 2020-2025, many factors contribute to homelessness including a shortage of affordable housing, unemployment, mental illness, family breakdown, domestic violence and drug and alcohol abuse. For people with disability (and their family members with care responsibilities), this is further compounded by additional barriers, such as low income and limited workforce opportunities, resulting in over-representation of people with disability in the homeless population around Australia (Beer et al., 2019). Individuals with disability also have poorer overall housing outcomes and often struggle to secure appropriate homes within the private rental space due to the increasingly unaffordable housing market (Beer et al., 2019).

Through the provision of disability advocacy services, as well as formal and informal partnerships with organisations working in the housing and related sectors, Explorability has gained insight into the challenges experienced by people navigating, not only the housing system, but the points where housing intersects with other systems, such as health or mental health.

Overview of Recommendations

As the All Paths Lead to a Home Action Plan 2020-2025 clearly identifies the need to deliver additional housing for people who are homeless, as well as appropriate housing options for specific groups, such as people living in group homes, or supported disability accommodation, the following recommendations will focus on improved streamlining of services as well as a cross sector case management approach.

Recommendation 1:

Increased access to cross-sector case management that is intensive, long-term, and addresses intersection issues between sectors and systems, reducing homelessness and improving outcomes for people.

Recommendation 2:

Improve streamlining of housing and homelessness services, including referral pathways, to reduce barriers such as the 'referral loop'

Submission

Recommendation 1:

Cross-sector case management that is intensive, long-term, and addresses intersections between sectors and systems, reducing homelessness and improving outcomes for people.

Case management is “a collaborative process of assessment, planning, facilitation and advocacy for options and services to meet an individual’s holistic needs through communication and available resources to promote quality cost-effective outcomes.”
(Marfleet, Trueman and Barber, 2013)

As previously mentioned, homelessness is multi-faceted. People who are homeless often experience difficulties in a range of life domains, including poor health, financial difficulties, addiction, mental health issues, relationship breakdown and increased risk of violence or abuse. Due to these complexities, it is clear that the response to homelessness requires a coordinated response across a number of sectors (Clifford et al., 2020).

Whilst ‘strengthening and coordinating our response’ is acknowledged in the All Paths Lead to a Home Strategy 2020-2030 and Action Plan 2020-2025, and the Housing First approach is referenced which emphasises ‘wraparound’ health and social services, Explorability’s experience is that extensive improvement is required in this area. For example, an individual experiencing acute mental health issues may require support to link in with an appropriate mental health service, before they are able to effectively engage with a housing program. However, for many housing services providers, their narrow scope, lack of capacity, and sometimes minimal expertise in the disability and/ or mental health space, limits successful engagement and coordination with other service systems.

Feedback example: Worker in the housing and homelessness sector

“There is frequent cross over with disability and homelessness or housing instability/inadequacy. Explorability provides the expertise many of our community members need to access in order to navigate appropriate funding or supports - expertise that our staff here do not possess as we are geared towards general housing support, emergency relief etc. Without Explorability Outreach, many community members would miss out on accessing appropriate support which then often exacerbates other struggles/barriers.”

Following on from the above example, a person with disability experiencing homelessness, may require additional services and supports, such as assistance with daily living and, without these supports, a housing option is unlikely to be successful. Whilst there are a few (very few) services who are able to assist a person with relevant referrals and applications, such as an access request to the National Disability Insurance Scheme, the process is often long and complicated. This is further compounded by infrequent previous contact with services such as health, mental health and disability services, that are required to provide reports to support the access request. Housing Services, and Housing Case Managers are generally not able to support individuals with disability in accessing the range of supports they require.

Furthermore, individuals experiencing homelessness commonly report to Explorability that they are overwhelmed with the immediate and critical needs of their situation (e.g. shelter and food) and are unable to complete their own referrals or applications for services without assistance. In addition, when referrals are made on behalf of a person experiencing homelessness, the person may not have capacity to follow-up or easily engage with a new service without additional support.

Feedback example: Individual who received Outreach Advocacy support

“I had received little to no support from other services to assist me with my goals – I had multiple goals [including access to appropriate housing, NDIS, Disability Support Pension, mental health services, and legal support] – the [Outreach] Advocate had the ability to cross over into different areas to bridge the gaps between goals – such as Housing [neighbour disputes/ priority transfer]. I believe the Advocate’s constant follow up and communication with Housing was the difference in me getting a priority housing transfer.”

As a result of Explorability's experiences, as well as feedback from individuals, it has become clear that an intensive, long-term, case management approach is required to support people experiencing or at risk of homelessness. The case management approach must be broad in scope - crossing sectors and issues, coordinating with all systems, and journeying alongside people experiencing homelessness and inter-related difficulties. This will 'bridge the gaps' at the intersections between sectors and systems, facilitating wrap-around services and supports, and enabling improved outcomes.

Recommendation 2:

Improved streamlining of housing and homelessness services, including referral pathways, to reduce barriers such as the 'referral loop'.

As intimated by the report 'Enabling a No Wrong Door System in Homelessness' Western Australia's housing system is complex to navigate. There are several housing service providers in the space, who have differing parameters and eligibility criteria. With the added pressure of waitlists for housing services, individuals are vulnerable to being constantly referred onwards, with little prospect of receiving support, thus becoming stuck in a "referral loop". Individuals with disability who may experience additional barriers such as communication difficulties, cognitive impairments, or mental illness, face compounding disadvantage.

Case Example: Referral loop

For nine months, a single mother and her two children have resided at a caravan park in a one-bedroom chalet after losing their private rental. The family, who are homeless, are at risk of losing this temporary accommodation due to paying \$700.00 per week in rental costs. Both children are NDIS participants with complex care needs. The family have been on the 'priority waitlist' for Housing for several months. Attempts to secure a private rental have been unsuccessful due to high demand and limited appropriate options.

Residing in the caravan park presents additional living and financial barriers. For example, the accommodation is unsuitable for the unique disability-related needs of the two children as it does not accommodate their sensory needs.

With the assistance of Explorability's Outreach Advocacy Program, support was sought from the following agencies: Entrypoint, Department of Communities Child Protection, Centrecare, Indigo Junction, Anglicare, The Salvation Army, City of Kwinana, NDIS Complex Needs Team, and St Patricks.

Case example: Referral loop, continued

The family were informed by transitional housing providers that their adversity does not match the organisation's support criteria or priorities. The family exceeded the brokerage limit for rental support at Entrypoint and Centrecare's Outreach service withdrew due to capacity issues. One involved service suggested the family leave Perth to find a cheaper caravan park in rural Western Australia. This is inappropriate as it does not consider the children's complex disability-related needs or the disruption to their education.

At present, the family are on the By-Name list, and despite ongoing applications for housing support, they continue to fall through gaps in housing services. A suitable housing option has yet to be found.

The experience of individuals being referred onwards without adequate support or follow-up, highlights the need for a more streamlined approach as well as the previously mentioned cross sector case management approach. Prioritisation of the 'No Wrong Door Approach' approach, including development and implementation of the online information platform to improve visibility of services and resources across the sector and the secure sharing of information (with consent) will greatly facilitate more streamlined approach to housing service provision.

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