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Inquiry into the Financial Administration of Homelessness Services in Western Australia

Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations
Legislative Council Committee Office
18-32 Parliament Place, West Perth

Ref: A930544

Dear Members,

Centrecare welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Inquiry into the Financial Administration of Homelessness Services in Western Australia.

Our response relates to the Terms of References, as follows:

1. The current funding and delivery of services
2. 'All Paths lead to a Home', Western Australia's 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness 2020-2030
3. Existing data systems and how data informs service delivery

Homelessness is a complex issue impacting upon the most vulnerable members of our community and requires a continuum of support across multiple sectors, including a commitment from a variety of government departments.

Centrecare acknowledges the commitment of the Department of Communities in addressing homelessness through its funding of housing and homelessness services, and we look forward to working closely with the newly established Office of Homelessness as they progress the priorities of the 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness.

Centrecare acknowledges the importance of the establishment of a dedicated Ministerial homelessness portfolio, led by the Honourable John Carey MLA. We also acknowledge the portfolio for the prevention of family and domestic violence, led by the Honourable Simone McGurk MLA, particularly given the extent to which family and domestic violence leads to experiences of homelessness for women and children.

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1) The current funding and delivery of services

Sustainable funding of homelessness services

Centrecare and other community service providers have experienced an ongoing rollover of homelessness service agreements on a yearly basis for 10 years, since 2012. This creates ongoing challenges in delivering quality services, including:

1. **Staffing:** the lack of certainty beyond 12-month contracts does not provide employment stability for staff, which impacts on the ability of organisations to retain quality, experienced staff with expertise in ending homelessness. Levels of funding mean that many roles are recruited at SCHADS level 4, which makes it challenging to recruit university qualified staff with the level of skills and experience necessary to work therapeutically with families experiencing highly complex trauma and other issues, when government and other positions are often higher paid.
2. **Continual Improvement:** While continual improvement does occur within services, it is challenging for organisations to commit significant resources into making changes, purchasing new programs and/or training packages and other resources, without the certainty of longevity of the service.
3. **Improved Data Collection:** As with point 2, without certainty of funding beyond 12-months, organisations are unable to commit to the purchase of software and other resources to enhance data collection within the services. Although the Specialist Homelessness Information Platform (SHIP) is provided to organisations and allows for the collation of the required reporting data to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, other software exists that can link outcomes-based client management software to SHIP to allow for greater collation and analysis of data and, importantly, outcome evaluations.

When the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement was introduced, despite the funding associated with the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness being maintained, the agreements between state departments were not renewed. As a result, in November 2020, Centrecare was contacted by the Department of Justice to advise that contracted staff of the Housing Support Worker; Corrective Services – Men no longer held authority to enter prisons to deliver the service or visit clients, effective immediately, as it had come to their attention that an agreement was no longer in place between the Department of Communities and the Department of Justice. Centrecare had been delivering pre-release support to men inside prisons since the service had commenced in 2010, under the agreement, to prepare men to transition into the community with housing options, and to avoid being released to homelessness. To gain back access to deliver services in the prisons, Centrecare was required to submit a Non-Contracted Services Application to Enter Prisons package, which was completed immediately. Unfortunately, a response to this application was not received until 30 March 2021, meaning the service was unable to engage with prison staff or prisoners for over four months, ultimately impacting upon the goal of achieving an end to homelessness for men exiting prison. The ongoing rollover of funding not only impacts on agencies delivering services, but also on government departments working together to achieve common goals.

A bipartisan approach to ending homelessness is required, with a long-term commitment at both a state and federal level. Similar to Western Australia's dedicated Minister for Homelessness and Office of Homelessness, a federal commitment to a national strategy to end homelessness, with collaboration from states and territories, would support the goal to end homelessness.

Longer-term, flexible service agreements that achieve outcomes

Many of the current service agreements stipulate specific client cohorts, specific referral pathways, and limit the length of time individuals can receive support. This does not allow for a flexible service that can adapt to the changing needs of the community. Fidelity to a housing first model requires continuity of support according to need. Increased flexibility to work with families and individuals experiencing complex, multifaceted, and intergenerational issues requires longer term support, persistent engagement, and consistency to allow for positive changes to be made to limit risk of homelessness. At times, this may include the capacity to provide multiple periods of intensive support over longer periods of time.

Flexible service agreements, or the ability to thoroughly review and adapt the services alongside Communities' Contract Managers, would allow for more innovative services that can meet changing demand within the community. Current service agreements have been rolled over for 12-month periods for the last 10 years, sometimes with only one-month notice. Longer-term service agreements of five to 10 years would allow for greater stability and opportunity to evaluate, learn, and improve service delivery, resulting in better outcomes for people who need these services.

Place based service delivery

Many current service agreements restrict service delivery to a particular location. For some contracts this works well, such as the Homelessness Accommodation Support Worker – Southeast and Northwest Metropolitan contracts, and the Private Rental Advocacy and Support Service contracts that allow for place-based services, with all corridors being covered by a service provider. However, in services that are cohort-specific, such as the Housing Support Worker; Corrective Services - Men contract, services are required to deliver services across the Metropolitan area. For Centrecare's contract, this means 1 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) to deliver services across five men's prisons, located over 100 kilometres apart. It is also important to recognise that place-based services do not always require a physical office in a particular location. Outreach services that provide in-home support offer existing community and place-based solutions to meet client need. The office location for outreach-based services is less important for the individual, children, and family if services are meeting with them wherever they are.

Contract commissioning and competitive tendering

It has been well established that to address homelessness adequately, a continuum of services is required that work collaboratively, including sharing of information. While the Western Australian homelessness sector has demonstrated its ability on countless occasions to collaborate independent of government, the nature of competitive tendering creates tension and can at times inhibit full collaboration and sharing of intellectual property and creative ideas among organisations, who understandably remain protective of their funding.

The State Government's encouragement of partnership approaches to tendering over recent years has resulted in many examples of strong, integrated service delivery by organisations working collaboratively under shared service agreements, often with a lead agency and one or more partnership agencies. While there are many positive outcomes to this, there is no doubt that the financial administrative burden shifts from government departments, who therefore have less contracts to manage, to the organisations within the partnership, who must commit significant amount of senior staff time to managing partnership relationships, creating joint Human Resource protocols, and meeting regularly to ensure a true partnership approach

to service delivery. Allocated funding for contracts does not recognise this financial and managerial burden on organisations. While collaboration is vital to achieve common outcomes, particularly to end homelessness, there exists also a financial administrative burden of ongoing collaboration in design processes and continual input required of agencies, which is not acknowledged in funding.

2) 'All Paths Lead to a Home', Western Australia's 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness 2020-2030

Centrecare is in full support of the principles and approaches of the 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness, however, still holds some reservations on the full implementation of the strategy within a poorly funded social services system.

Families and children

While it is acknowledged that the 10-Year Strategy is still within its first five-year Action Plan, which focuses on ending rough sleeping, building a no wrong door system and low barrier crisis responses, it is evident that there is little conversation about the growing number of children facing or at risk of homelessness and the impacts of this upon children's safety, wellbeing, and futures. Centrecare's experience across all areas of service delivery is that families presenting in unstable housing, overcrowded housing, unsafe environments and sleeping in temporary shelters are increasing. This places children's safety and wellbeing at risk. This is of particular concern given the extensive research available on the impacts of childhood trauma on mental illness, drug and alcohol misuse, involvement in the criminal justice system, child protection concerns, and other complex issues. It is also well documented that children who experience periods of homelessness are at increased risk of experiencing homelessness as an adult.

While the Strategy clearly identifies both early intervention and youth as key areas, early intervention must start well before addressing youth homelessness. Working specifically with children who are experiencing homelessness, or are at risk of homelessness, to increase their resilience and emotional regulation and to increase their knowledge of protective behaviours, assists to break the cycle of intergenerational homelessness and minimise trauma. If early intervention doesn't begin with the children who have experienced homelessness or are constantly on the edge of homelessness, generational homelessness will not cease. Children who are homeless or at constant risk of homelessness, living in overcrowded situations and in extreme poverty are open to situational sexual abuse, witnessing of extreme violence, live in constant fear for their own safety and those they love, are less likely to attend school regularly, are victims of crime, and are more likely to experience mental health and physical health issues. Early intervention needs to start with children, not just youth, to prevent child abuse and neglect, and to promote resilience and life skills to circumvent future homelessness. Children have a right to be heard, cared for, and have a safe place to call home.

Families that are experiencing complex, multifaceted issues, including intergenerational involvement with multiple departments, a history of failed tenancies and who have been historically difficult to engage, are in themselves a specific cohort whose needs need to be addressed through targeted services that are not restricted by time limits. These families make up a small cohort, but are well known to government departments, non-government agencies and housing providers, and contribute significantly to the costs of homelessness, including significant resources across police, child protection, adult and youth justice and non-government organisations. A strong housing first approach is required to support these

families, including appropriate housing for their needs, and intensive, individualised, culturally appropriate wrap-around supports that are not time limited. Specific funding is imperative to support these situations, as risk of property damage is high and is challenging to absorb within services with limited funds.

Culturally responsive services

Significant investment is required to ensure culturally competent services for all cultural groups. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience homelessness and housing insecurity at significantly higher rates than non-Aboriginal people. Innovative solutions need to be prioritised to address this, including investment into strengthening Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and Aboriginal Community Housing Organisations, as well as ensuring mainstream services meet the needs of Aboriginal people. Long-term solutions are required, including culturally appropriate housing stock.

Culturally and linguistically diverse people, particularly those with a humanitarian and refugee background, also have unique needs and require a culturally appropriate and competent response to situations of homelessness and risk of homelessness.

Early intervention and prevention

It is more cost-effective to keep people housed than to support them out of homelessness. This saves across multiple sectors. Services that are preventative are often not aimed at true earlier interventions, but instead are engaged once tenancies are nearing eviction. To end homelessness, we must combine support for rough sleepers with equal focus on earlier intervention to stop the inflow to homelessness.

Safe, affordable, and appropriate housing

The Strategy's clear priority is imbedding the Housing First Model into Western Australia's approach to ending homelessness. Housing First is a model that has proven successful across many jurisdictions. Housing supply is crucial to the success of this model, as are well-funded, person-centered, individualised support services. Western Australia's social housing stock has declined over recent years, and the COVID pandemic has further impacted housing supply. For the Strategy to be successful, and for housing stock to meet demand, long-term planning for adequate social and affordable housing is vital.

3) Existing data systems and how data informs service delivery

Existing data systems are not linked and do not allow for sharing of information. While a lot of data is collected, it is challenging for services to extensively analyse data and longer-term outcomes of service users across agencies. The Department of Communities, via its contracted services, would be well placed to commission research evaluation of services. Data on rough sleeping is becoming clearer, particularly in the Central Business District (CBD) and other visible areas, but the level of hidden homelessness amongst families and young people in suburban and regional areas is hidden and vastly under reported. The true extent of homelessness or at risk of homelessness will continue to remain under reported or over reported with a silo approach.

The existing data systems do not allow for an accurate picture of unmet demand across the state, or show the true picture of homelessness, inclusive of those at imminent risk of homelessness. Availability of services to support people and families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness also needs to be evaluated to ensure full utilisation of capacity and to

then assess a more accurate picture of unmet demand in the state. Data collected within the Specialist Homelessness Information Platform (SHIP) is designed to meet the reporting needs of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. While it allows most services to collate data required for six-monthly progress reports, it does not allow for effective measurement of outcomes for clients based on individual need, or effectiveness of the service.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. Please direct enquires to Leanne Strommen, General Manager of Centrecare.