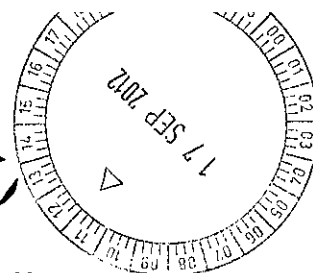


ABN 92 491 228 162



St. Bartholomew's House

Reconnecting lives.

Standing Committee for the Homeless
Parliament House
PERTH WA 6000

13 September 2012

Dear Sir/Madam

Re; Response to Petition 137 – Emergency Accommodation for the Homeless

Thankyou for the opportunity to respond to Petition 137 - Emergency Accommodation for the Homeless.

Please see following our responses to the questions raised.

In your opinion, to what extent will the Government initiatives have an impact on homelessness in Western Australia?

Government supported initiatives, including in recent times the St Bartholomew's House Lime Street accommodation project, will help make a significant impact on homelessness in Western Australia. This project has been funded via a mix of both State and Federal contributions, Lottery west and our own fundraising efforts.

Large scale projects such as this provide a resource for not only accommodation needs, but the delivery of services, care and support to assist homeless people to move through a process of growth, rebuilding and reconnection back into the wider community.

St Bart's is in the process of planning its next big capacity enhancement with the redevelopment of our old homeless and aged care facilities in Brown St, East Perth for the purposes of socially affordable housing. It is clear that housing affordability and availability is a key issue for our community and our goal with the redevelopment project is the provision of affordable housing, with a particular emphasis on older people at risk of homelessness.

With a population that is both fast growing and ageing, as we have here in WA, the needs become even more acute. There is therefore a need to make continued investment in both accommodation and support resources and programs to meet the needs of homeless people and help them through the experience and prevent the cycle continuing.

In order to get the most impact, the NPAH initiatives need to be reviewed and updated to reflect the current situation and build on the first 3 years of service

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provision and the lessons learnt. These programs are currently being evaluated. In order to ensure that they are able to meet the needs of homeless people and have optimal impact, the initiatives need to be continued, incorporating the information and advice that comes from the evaluation process.

These initiatives are a new direction for the agencies involved and have helped build important relationships and improved collaboration and information sharing among WA homelessness services, which can only lead to more positive outcomes for homeless people by providing services that are appropriate, tailored to individual client needs, available and ongoing. This needs to be supported, invested in and encouraged.

NAHA funding needs to be recognized as an important resource to provide appropriate and meaningful support and to help prevent clients cycling back into homelessness. Often, the opportunity of first contact with a homeless person or someone at risk of homelessness is a key moment and services need to provide for the specific and individual needs of each client.

A combination of both supported accommodation options and tailored, individually focussed services and support is the best way to ensure good outcomes for clients and prevent cycling back into homelessness. Therefore, it is vital given the growth profile of WA and our changing demographic that the focus remains firmly on both the provision of accommodation, services and support to homeless people. In this way, the Government initiatives in place will have maximum benefit and impact. The withdrawal of Government support around the accommodation and support needs for homeless people and those at risk would be catastrophic and would see significant worsening in the level of disadvantage and despair in the community. Withdrawal of services and support will also have a significant financial cost to the community via increased numbers of emergency medical and hospital admissions, law and order and social service impact.

Are there specific services or resources needed in addition to the measures being undertaken?

St Bart's has expressed the need for an in-reach, linkages programs to allow mental health services to provide more care and support to homeless people who are accommodated in specialist homelessness services. The purpose of this Mental Health linkages service helps facilitate a multi disciplinary approach to provide rapid response to client needs. It will support collaboration between the mental health and accommodation services to benefit the client by giving a more individualised and appropriate response. The overall purpose of a mental health linkages approach is to provide early intervention to prevent hospitalization and to improve the connections with mental health services in the community.

There is broad recognition that many people who face homelessness have significant undiagnosed mental health issues. Mental health linkages and in-reach services will assist in providing tailored support and care plans for these clients to help them move through a process and prevent them cycling back into homelessness.

There is a real need for more emergency and crisis accommodation for provide basic shelter and safety for rough sleepers. We understand that that there is one 10 bed shelter in the planning phase but this will not meet the need. Additionally,

these emergency accommodation services need to include women, singles and couples and older people. Couples accommodation options are under resourced, as are options for women who are not experiencing domestic violence issues but are homeless.

The sobering up centre, Bridge House, is limited to opening hours of evenings and nights only which provides barriers for those who are intoxicated during the day. If this resource was opened 24 hours a day, there would likely be a reduction in incidents involving police and referrals to accident and emergency medical services.

Improved staffing levels in supported accommodation and drop in centres will help ensure client needs are met. Services are often dealing with a diverse and challenging client mix, many of whom have very complex needs. In order to ensure client needs are met and prevent the cycle of homelessness continuing, the service needs optimum staffing levels and resourcing in order to engage each client individually.

Housing and accommodation options remain an important and growing need here in WA. In planning housing options for homeless people, consideration needs to be given to transport linkages and access to necessary services for clients with complex needs to prevent social isolation and cutting homeless people off from their support networks by moving them into accommodation options that are not suitable.

We also remain very concerned about the issue of homelessness among older people. We see this as a critical issue. Apart from the increased capacity of our own residential aged care program at St. Bart's from 20 to 40 beds in the new facility, there have been no significant measures implemented in WA at either a State or Federal level to reduce older homelessness - a looming gap in the provision of emergency accommodation especially for older women.

This response refers to the impact of State & Federal Government initiatives in addressing emergency accommodation and homelessness for older people. Nationally and in WA this response falls under the Assistance with Care and Housing for the Aged (ACHA)

The Assistance with Care and Housing for the Aged (ACHA) Program was established in 1993 as a three year pilot program to trial approaches aimed at assisting financially disadvantaged older people who are homeless or in insecure accommodation, to meet both their accommodation and care needs through referral and advocacy to other service providers.

The objective of the ACHA Program is to help eligible clients, who are at risk of becoming homeless or are homeless, to remain in the community through accessing appropriate, sustainable and affordable housing and linking them where appropriate, to community care.

We recommend that the State Government add value to the ACHA program by providing a pool of emergency, transitional and affordable secure accommodation for ACHA providers, with consideration being given to security (safety), access to public transport, health services and social networks.

We recommend the expansion of the ACHA program in WA and that the State Government match the Federal Government investment dollar for dollar. Additionally, the State Government should negotiate with Federal Government to increase the ACHA program within the metropolitan area including major regional centres in WA. The 2010 -2011 funding received in WA was \$403,676 for the four service areas.

Rent affordability issues and increased utilities costs are having a severe impact in the community, particularly on older people, where any rise in living costs can place them at risk of homelessness. Very low vacancy rates in the private rental market, combined with high median rents and extended wait lists for public housing can lead to severe financial and emotional stress and an increased incidence in both physical and mental health issues. Services and resources that are aimed at improving rental affordability and availability needs to a priority issue. These initiatives will include investment in socially affordable housing projects, land availability, less red tape and lowering costs for land development.

Clearly there is an unmet need to support homeless people who are either unable or unwilling, at the time, to enter into accommodation services that also require them to undertake support programs with the provider. Many of these people have been homeless for extended periods of time, have very acute and complex needs and are at high risk of severe health issues and increased mortality. In these cases, other accommodation options such as those described earlier in the response to this question needs to part of the mix of services and support provided to homeless people.

St Barts looks after around 600 clients a year who come into our crisis and transitional support programs. Around 420 of these are new clients who require one-off support to help them through, with the remaining returning to us having had previous contact with our service. Sadly, we have to turn people away from our services almost everyday due to an inability to accommodate them. In those cases we will attempt to refer them on to other agencies, but many of them are experiencing similar capacity issues.

Can homelessness in WA be quantified? Is it possible to provide accurate numbers on how many people are homeless, the extent of unmet need for emergency accommodation and the demographics of those turned away from emergency accommodation? What, if any, improvements to data are needed?

The opening of new premises in 2012-2013 will mean that around 1,500 homeless people will be accommodated in the inner city area of Perth in services operated by St Bart's, 55 Central, The Salvation Army and lodging houses operated by Foundation Housing. We know that the numbers of people seeking out support from specialist homeless services providers has been increasing.

Quantifying the precise numbers can be difficult, but can be done to some extent. All specialist homelessness services in WA report on the services provided and those unassisted through a national data base known as SHIP. Information on the numbers is then collated by AIHW. This provides data on what services were provided and referrals made. If a person was not supported the information is categorized under a heading that can be vague.

Census information and Registry week can assist with data around numbers of rough sleepers in certain areas; however there is still a cohort of homeless people that remain unknown. Census data around homelessness that has been released in recent days helps us get a better and more accurate sense of the scale of the problem; however we are aware that there are inherent difficulties in accurately assessing the numbers of homeless people at any time. The ABS has recognized in its report of 11 September 2012 that a variety of data sources is required to more accurately assess the numbers, beyond that of just the census itself.

It's important also that the new definition of homelessness and methodology to calculate the numbers now adopted by the ABS be implemented also by local State Governments. This will ensure consistency in approach and help ensure a more accurate measure of the homeless.

In Aug 2012, Perth had its first ever registry week that saw 60 volunteers go out into the inner city and the town of Vincent in the early hours of the morning to meet with and attempt to assess people sleeping rough. The data revealed a total of 185 people identified in the catchment area, many of whom had been homeless for some time, with 28% of those surveyed reported being homeless for more than 10 years.

There is also a greater need for research and evaluation around the success of the programs and support offered by specialist homelessness services providers. The implementation in 2012 of the Perth Homelessness sector network, of which St Bart's has taken a lead role, is helping to share and disseminate information throughout the sector and it is hoped that this network will continue to strengthen the lines of communication and support among providers. Recent meetings with providers and the Dept. of Child Protection around the need for more research and evaluation of services and programs is a positive step in assessing the success and the outcomes for homeless people moving through our services. It is hoped that this focus on R&E will help quantify and assess the outcomes for homeless people and to ensure that programs and services are appropriate and tailored to the individual needs of clients.

Is there a network for emergency accommodation providers to show where there are vacancies at any given time? If not, would this kind of information sharing be helpful to providers and their clients?

DGP bed count now has an online, live system that is updated daily by all specialist homelessness services. This shows vacancies for viewing by all who have access, including crisis care. This has information re crisis and transitional accommodation for men, women and youth, with contact details for the service and an outline of what the service provides.

This information has come on line in the last 6-7 months and has been useful when re-directing people who seek assistance but may not meet the criteria for the service. This information is not accessible by hospitals, Centrelink or other outside agencies. In the Eastern States they have a similar system, but it is more of a centralized resource with a search tool allowing identification of agencies that provide a variety of services such as food parcels, storage, clothing, household

goods and furnishings as well as accommodation. There is therefore scope for significant improvement and expansion of this online system here in WA.

The implementation in 2012 of the Perth Homelessness sector network, mentioned above, is helping to share and disseminate information throughout the sector and it is hoped that this network will continue to strengthen the lines of communication and support among providers.

Feedback re letters from the Ministers for Housing

The letters outline the projects that are currently either approaching completion or on the radar for 2012-13 and the current funding arrangements for specialist homeless services and housing and accommodation providers.

The key issue here is to note the importance of maintaining momentum and keeping the focus firmly on the provision of appropriate accommodation options and services for homeless people. While the projects discussed are all important in providing options and services, there remains a need for more accommodation options to ensure that homeless people can find shelter, a home of their own and support and move through the cycle of homelessness to live full, independent and happy lives.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Hogan

Chief Executive Officer

St Bartholomew's House Inc

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