



**ShelterWA**

PROMOTING AFFORDABLE HOUSING

## **Feedback on the Government Response to Emergency Accommodation and Homelessness**

**Response to the Standing Committee on  
Environment and Public Affairs Regarding Petition  
No.137 – Emergency Accommodation for the  
Homeless**

**Chantal Roberts**

**Organisation**

**Email**

**Executive Officer**

**Shelter WA**

**[eo@shelterwa.org.au](mailto:eo@shelterwa.org.au)**

## **About Shelter WA**

Shelter WA is the peak body for affordable housing and homelessness in Western Australia. It is an independent community based organisation committed to accessible, affordable and secure housing for every Western Australian. Shelter WA provides a link between government and the community, through consultation, research, systemic advocacy, policy advice and development. Our role is to provide an independent voice on housing rights and options in the state along the housing continuum, with a focus on low to moderate income earners, those who are otherwise disadvantaged in the housing market and people experiencing homelessness.

## **Feedback on the Government response to emergency accommodation and homelessness**

Shelter WA wishes to convey our appreciation of the Standing Committee's request for our comments on this significant social issue. Our responses are based on current research and consultations with stakeholders through forums, workshops and surveys.

### **1. In your opinion, to what extent will the Government initiatives have an impact on homelessness in WA?**

Government initiatives to respond to homelessness in Western Australia have had a significant impact. The National Housing Agreement on Homelessness (NAHA) and associated National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH) represented a much needed boost in homelessness funding for services and programs in WA. With these new funding arrangements, WA has made significant strides in providing much needed accommodation and services to people experiencing homelessness.

For many people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness, the services they receive have had a substantial impact on their well-being. Flatau et al (2008) conducted a study of the cost effectiveness of homelessness services. They found that 'On entry to support, study participants reported a significant improvement in housing outcomes as a result of the assistance they received from agencies: 57.9 per cent reported that their housing position was much better than before assistance was forthcoming. A further 23.7 per cent indicated that their housing position was somewhat better than before assistance was provided' (2008, p.3). They found that clients' perceptions of safety increased dramatically upon accessing homelessness services. For example, they found that '62.0 per cent of clients in the Client Survey reported that assistance had resulted in improved feelings of safety following entry to support. The strongest response is evident for the SAAP-DV and Single Women category of clients where 86.1 per cent indicated that assistance had resulted in an improvement in feelings of safety' (Flatau et al 2008, p.3). These outcomes for clients are in addition to the cost savings for government. Homelessness services are relatively inexpensive when compared to other types of accommodation (i.e. hospital, criminal justice system) that people may require when unable to access appropriate crisis accommodation.

The programs and services have been very effective in meeting the immediate needs of a percentage of people experiencing homelessness in WA, however many of those services are funded to provide short- to medium-term interventions and support. For many participants, the issues which have led to their homelessness are entrenched or complex, and for some are grounded in historical factors, hence for support to be effective for those people it needs to be long-term.

New facilities such as those at St. Bart's Lime Street complex, The Oxford Foyer and the Lentara redevelopment will all provide much needed relief for people experiencing homelessness in inner city Perth. These investments in buildings and services represent an important step to address homelessness in WA. Further investments of this kind are required to support other groups requiring assistance, such as single women, seniors, women with children (not escaping domestic violence) and young people (not linked to education but to employment).

In order to build upon the successes thus far and continue providing essential supports to people experiencing, or at risk of, homelessness, the existing services must be funded beyond the current funding cycle, and beyond the current funding constraints, to include longer term support and more affordable housing.

## **2. Are there specific services or resources needed in addition to the measures being undertaken?**

Homelessness is part of the continuum of housing need in WA. As we see an increase in the number of people seeking homelessness services due to financial reasons - from 11.2% in 2006-07 to 14.4% in 2010-2011 (AIHW 2011a) - the severe affordable housing shortage in WA will continue to increase demand on services. The housing situation in Western Australia, which has seen property prices increase disproportionately in relation to income and private rental vacancy rates below 2%, has resulted in a severe lack of exit points for people participating in homeless services, as well as affordable accommodation generally for people on a low to moderate income.

The WA Department of Housing is undertaking a number of important initiatives to increase the supply of affordable housing. More needs to be done in this area to increase supply at a faster rate. This will require a range of innovative solutions to get more houses built quickly in order to be made available to low and moderate income earners.

Shelter WA has identified a need for specific services and resources in the following areas:

### **Aboriginal people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness**

The main gaps in services are for Aboriginal people who may not access mainstream services for a variety of reasons. Memmott, Birdsall-Jones and Greenop (2012) argue that specialist services are needed to address Aboriginal homelessness because there are many different categories of homelessness among Aboriginal people that may not correspond to mainstream homelessness services. They propose a categorisation that differentiates between (i) public place dwelling persons, (ii) housed at risk of homelessness; and (iii) spiritually homeless persons. The differing circumstances around peoples' homelessness will influence the type of service required.

In addition, more visitor accommodation is urgently required for Aboriginal people visiting Perth for various reasons from regional and remote areas, including for medical treatment or funeral attendances. Such facilities could be based on similar models that have been adopted in South Australia and Alice Springs to cater to visiting Aboriginal individuals and families.

### **Low barrier night shelters**

In 2011, Shelter WA facilitated a workshop for the Parks People Project Working Group and the Central Regional Managers Human Services Forum. Over 100 representatives of relevant government agencies and non-government organisations, elected members, and other key stakeholders participated in the Perth Homeless Response Workshop. The purpose of the workshop was to encourage collaboration amongst key stakeholders towards delivering appropriate support and accommodation outcomes for Aboriginal peoples and others who are experiencing primary homelessness (rough sleeping) in parks and inner city areas of the City of Perth and the City of Vincent. At the workshop, numerous stakeholders articulated the urgent need for a night shelter. It is recognised that a night shelter is a necessary part of a broader system to address homelessness in the cities of Perth and Vincent, alongside assertive outreach, preventative programs, transitional housing and longer-term solutions. Participants suggested that the shelter be:

- Centrally located.
- Low-barrier entry, including access for people who are intoxicated or have been banned from other services.
- Aboriginal staff and/or culturally-competent staff trained to work with Aboriginal clients.
- Integrated with the Nyoongar Patrol.
- Lessons from Bega night shelter in Kalgoorlie indicated that the facility should be owned and managed by an Aboriginal corporation.
- Provide accommodation for men, women, and families.
- Include day use and storage facilities

The final report for the workshop included the following recommendations:

- Seek funding for a 35 bed facility or several smaller facilities to accommodate diverse needs of target population.
- Seek support from local governments for the development of a night shelter through their planning processes.
- Seek funding for a feasibility study to determine the need for a night shelter to provide accommodation for homeless women with or without children, that is not restricted to women experiencing domestic violence.

Given that this workshop only centred on the Perth inner city, we would also suggest that similar shelters be provided in Fremantle and Midland, to address the needs of Aboriginal peoples from those locations.

### **Prevention and early intervention services for young people**

Shelter WA convened two workshops on Young People, Housing and Homelessness in June and August 2012. Many of the participants identified the success of the Re-connect programs and similar services aimed at assisting young people experiencing homelessness or those at-risk of homelessness. Service providers noted they are seeing an increase in the need for services among adolescents aged 10-15, and often younger, and that there are not enough flexible support services available to this age group. Many issues that once presented in older teenagers are now showing up in a much younger cohort. By the time those young people are old enough to be eligible for services, their issues have become so entrenched or serious that they become much more difficult to support. For services, by the time the young people are eligible to receive services they have missed a crucial window of opportunity to intervene and the young people are ending up homeless (or secondary or tertiary homeless) by age 15.

Shelter WA recommends extending homelessness services, particularly those aimed at prevention and early intervention to young people 10 – 15, and in some cases young people under 10 require services, and case workers need the flexibility to work with children in this age range, particularly if older siblings are receiving services.

There is also a shortage of services for young people 15-24 years, and in particular out of hours outreach support. The workshops referred to above also indicated an urgent need for a respite facility for young people, to provide a safe and supportive environment to assist the young people to deal with relationship and family conflict issues to prevent imminent homelessness.

### **Crisis and ongoing accommodation for the aged**

As the cost of private rentals increases, Assistance with Care and Housing for the Aged (ACHA) coordinators have encountered an increase in demand for crisis accommodation for seniors, particularly for single women and couples. A recent study by McFerran (2010) found an increase in the number of older women facing homelessness for the first time and that homelessness service providers are unable to provide the services they need. In WA, ACHA coordinators have noted an increase in the number of people unable to maintain their tenancy in private rentals due to increasing costs and landlords unwilling to allow modifications to the property (i.e. handrails and other supporting aides). Existing crisis accommodation facilities are inappropriate for the specific needs of seniors experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness, and there is an urgent need for this type of housing for seniors.

In addition, seniors also require safe, secure ongoing accommodation to which they may transition following crisis situations. For the reasons outlined above, accessing appropriate and affordable private rental accommodation is problematic for seniors. Seniors require a variety of accommodation types, responsive to their particular needs where they can reside with dignity and in community. This includes seniors' complexes, co-operative housing, housing within multi-use facilities and supported accommodation.

### **Homelessness prevention services for CALD families**

The Housing Crisis Committee for the Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) has identified a serious shortage of affordable housing options for CALD families. This group is particularly vulnerable to homelessness due to the high cost of housing in the Perth metropolitan area, the requirement for housing suitable for large families and discrimination experienced by CALD families in the private rental market. Many CALD families are not eligible for social housing due to income limits, but do not have sufficient income to access appropriate housing in the private rental market. These families are susceptible to homelessness and require specialised services to help them secure and maintain accommodation in social housing, the private rental market and affordable home ownership, depending on their situation.

### **Crisis and emergency accommodation for men with children**

There are no services, programs or facilities for men with accompanying children. This demographic is unable to access refuge accommodation, which is specifically for women only, and the available shelters and crisis accommodation places are not suitable for men with children.

**3. 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 collection are needed?**

**Number of people who are homeless in WA**

The ABS released a new definition of homelessness in September 2012, which informed the re-tabulation of homelessness data from 2001 and 2006. The new definition of homelessness replaces the 'cultural definition' of homelessness as previously applied by Chamberlain and MacKenzie (2008).

The ABS definition states that when a person does not have suitable accommodation alternatives they are considered homeless if their current living arrangement:

- is in a dwelling that is inadequate; or
- has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable; or
- does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations.

The ABS definition of homelessness is informed by an understanding of homelessness as 'home'lessness, not rooflessness. It emphasises the core elements of 'home' in Anglo American and European interpretations of the meaning of home as identified in research evidence (Mallett 2004).

These elements may include: a sense of security, stability, privacy, safety, and the ability to control living space. Homelessness is therefore a lack of one or more of the elements that represent 'home'.

The new methodology has resulted in a re-tabulation of homelessness data from the 2006 Census. By applying the new definition the figures for people experiencing homelessness in WA are lower than previously reported. This is due to a number of changes which are detailed in ABS (2012). One of the biggest changes includes removing people from the category of homelessness (which had been referred to as tertiary homeless) and re-naming them as people in marginal housing. It should be noted that the changes in the data do not reflect a change in the number of people at risk; it simply reflects a change in methodology. Shelter WA can provide more details about these changes upon request. Using the new definition, homelessness data is shown below for those who indicated WA as the state of their usual address in the 2006 Census.

**Homeless operational groups and other marginal housing,  
WA usual residence, 2006 (ABS 2012)**

Persons who are in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out	1,016
Persons in supported accommodation for the homeless	1,088
Persons staying temporarily with other households	2,101
Persons staying in boarding houses	1,024

Persons in temporary lodging	65
Persons in 'severely' crowded dwellings	2,983
<b>All homeless persons</b>	<b>8,277</b>
Persons living in other crowded dwellings	3,291
Persons in other improvised dwellings	1,143
Persons who are marginally housed in caravan parks	1,178
<b>All homeless persons and other marginally housed</b>	<b>13,889</b>

Figures for the 2011 Census will be released in November 2012. These new figures will allow for a comparison with 2006 and provide insight into changes in the number and demographics of the homeless population in Australia.

More detailed information has become available for some people sleeping rough in Perth. Ruah Community Services coordinated the Perth Registry Week in August 2012, which included staff and volunteers interviewing people sleeping rough in inner city Perth and completing a 'Vulnerability index'. Of those approached, 158 agreed to be interviewed and 29 declined. The youngest respondent was 13 and the oldest was 73. Half of the young people under 25 had been in foster care or another institution. Thirty-six per cent were Aboriginal. Forty-five people (28%) reported having been homeless for more than 10 years. Ruah calculated the number of presentations at Emergency Departments in the past three months and estimated the cost (Ruah 2012):

- 73 people had 278 presentations
- A total cost of \$156,514 for the past 3 months (based on average cost of ED presentation)

Inpatient hospital admissions in past year:

- 81 people had 260 admissions
- Total cost \$1.48 million per year (based on an average cost per stay for hospitalisation) (\$5686 per admission Metro Health Services Annual Report 2010-11 x = \$1,478,360) (\$563 Metropolitan Health Service Annual Report 2010-11 x278 = \$156,514)

#### **Extent of unmet need for emergency accommodation**

According to the AIHW (2011) an estimated 19,500 people received support from a government-funded specialist homelessness agency in Western Australia during 2010-2011. Of these, 11,600 (59%) were clients and 7,900 (41%) were children accompanying clients.

Service users in Western Australia were (AIHW 2011):

- mostly female—58% of all service users and 64% of clients
- relatively young—the average (mean) age of service users was 22 years overall, 34 years for clients, and 6 years for accompanying children; and the highest rate of use of services was by 15–19 year-olds—an equivalent of 1 in 80 West Australians aged 15–19 used services
- mostly non-Indigenous (66%). Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples were, however, over-represented relative to their population size—34% of service users in Western Australia identified as Indigenous compared with 3% of West Australians. The proportion of Indigenous service users was the second highest nationally (after the Northern Territory)

- mostly Australian-born (82%). The next most common countries of birth were New Zealand and Sudan. The proportions of Australian-born clients and accompanying children were the lowest of all the states and territories.

In the December 2011 quartile, a total of 9,252 people received assistance through homelessness service providers in WA (AIHW 2012, p.29). This included 3,778 men and 5,474 women. During the December quartile, there were 44,939 nights of short-term/emergency accommodation provided, 68,680 nights of medium/transitional accommodation provided, and 23,618 nights of long term accommodation provided.

The data collected by the AIHW in 2010–11 indicates that government-funded specialist homelessness agencies are operating to capacity and are unable to completely meet the demand for accommodation (AIHW 2011b). Some groups, such as families, experience more difficulty than others in obtaining accommodation. ***On an average day, 48.6% of all people who made a new request for immediate accommodation were turned away in WA.*** This measure provides an indication of a person’s likelihood of obtaining government-funded specialist homelessness accommodation on any given day. It excludes people already in accommodation.

New requests, however, comprise only 2.5% of the total demand for accommodation (AIHW 2011c). This measure provides an indication of the ability of agencies to meet the total expressed demand for government-funded specialist homelessness accommodation. It includes people already accommodated by these agencies. The text box below describes how these two figures are measured.

#### **Measuring the Turn-away rate (AIHW 2011b)**

The first measure (48.6% in WA in 2010-2011) is the turn-away rate for people requiring new and immediate accommodation. It is calculated as the daily average percentage of people who were turned away relative to all people who required new and immediate accommodation. This provides an indication of a person’s likelihood of obtaining government-funded specialist homelessness accommodation.

However, government-funded specialist homelessness agencies accommodate large numbers of people on any given day, including people who are continuing their accommodation from a previous day. For this reason, simply examining the daily request turn-away without acknowledging the number of people already in accommodation may provide an incomplete picture. It is therefore important to consider those turned away in relation to the total expressed demand for accommodation.

This second measure (2.5% in WA in 2010-2011) is calculated as the daily average percentage of people who were turned away relative to all people who required new and immediate accommodation plus those who were continuing their accommodation from the previous day. It provides an indication of the overall ability of government-funded specialist homelessness agencies to meet the demand for their accommodation.

It is important to note that neither of these measures provide an indication of the additional capacity required to meet the expressed demand for accommodation, only a measure of the undersupply of accommodation (in terms of people) on an average day during the Demand for Accommodation Collection period.

While it is important to include both figures when assessing unmet need, it is particularly important not to ignore the first measure of 48.6% since this indicates that almost half of

the people requesting accommodation on any given night are turned away, most often because services are at capacity or the person does not fit the particular criteria of the service.

The shortage of affordable housing in Western Australia, and the extent of the social housing (public and community housing) waiting list also contributes to the turn-away rate and unmet need. Clients are remaining in services far longer than permissible because there are not exit points and it is not feasible or ethical for crisis and homeless services to exit clients into homelessness. This is creating a bottleneck effect and in fact clogging up services.

#### **Demographics of those turned away**

In WA in 2010-2011, the turn away rate for people requiring new and immediate accommodation was 50.8% for accompanying children. The turn away rate including all those housed by government specialist homelessness services was 2.4% for accompanying children (AIHW 2011c). Of those turned away, 42.6% were male and 57.4% were female. This figure includes accompanying children. When only considering adults and unaccompanied children, the gender breakdown of those turned away is 64% female and 36% male. Of the adults and unaccompanied children turned away, 34.8% were under 20 years old. Fifty-three per cent of those turned away were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and 13.7% were born in a non-English speaking country (AIHW 2011c).

#### **Improvements to data collection**

As mentioned, the ABS has recently changed its definition of homelessness and will use this definition when releasing homelessness data from the 2011 Census. It will be important to ensure this new definition does not undercount particular groups of people experiencing homelessness – particularly Aboriginal people and young people. Shelter WA, along with Homelessness Australia and other housing organisations are monitoring whether the changed definition will accurately reflect the level of homelessness in WA.

#### **4. Is there an online network for emergency accommodation providers that show where there are vacancies at any given time? If not, would this kind of information sharing be helpful to providers and their clients?**

Shelter WA's involvement in government, non-government and community networks has highlighted a fundamental gap for people experiencing homelessness, as well as for service providers in the community sector, including government and non-government workers. Western Australia needs a centralised referral service for people presenting with homelessness issues in Western Australia, and those at imminent risk of homelessness. One of the principal issues of concern articulated by consumers and providers alike is the current requirement for people experiencing homelessness to contact and register with multiple social housing and/or supported accommodation providers, and repeat their story several times in their attempts to secure crisis, transitional or ongoing housing. Once registered, they are then required to contact each agency regularly (usually every two to three weeks) to remain registered. Another key issue is the inability for individuals, service providers and government workers to be aware of all the resources available which may be able to assist at any given time, given the changing and expanding state of the sector.

Over the last several years, there has been an expansion of housing providers and housing support services, due in part to an injection of funds under the National Affordable Housing Agreement and the associated National Partnership Agreements on Homelessness.

In addition, the State Affordable Housing Strategy, the Economic Stimulus Plan and the resource boom have also resulted in considerable changes to the housing landscape in Western Australia. This has culminated in many new key stakeholders emerging in the housing sector, and a resultant confusion about what is available and where agencies and individuals can access services to support clients presenting with homelessness issues.

Hence, Shelter WA recommends that the State government fund the development of a centralised homelessness referral service, whereby people experiencing homelessness, or at imminent risk of homelessness, may phone and obtain an immediate referral to a housing provider or support service meeting their needs.

This type of referral service could easily operate alongside Crisis Care, by providing Crisis Care staff with a reliable resource to which callers may be referred. This type of homelessness referral service would considerably reduce the demands on Crisis Care staff, who currently deal with a vast majority of homeless callers, without the resources to refer to specific non-crisis housing. Such a service would therefore assist Crisis Care staff to more effectively respond to crisis calls relating to children at risk and family violence, for which the service was set up.

**5. The letters from the Minister for Housing outline the measures being undertaken by the Government to provide more affordable housing in WA. Your comments regarding the impact and adequacy of these initiatives would be appreciated.**

Shelter WA commends the Department of Housing for its efforts in its *Opening Doors: Affordable Housing Strategy* aimed at addressing affordable housing in WA beyond public and social housing. In particular, new initiatives such as Rental Pathways and the Shared Equity Scheme are welcome additions to increase the number of affordable housing options available to low and moderate income earners in WA.

Similarly, The NPAH and NAHA services, the funding for which is administered by the Department for Child Protection, have provided much needed services to those in need in Western Australia, and have resulted in many innovative and successful programs to alleviate homelessness.

As already pointed out in an earlier point, the housing situation is such in Western Australia that household costs have increased disproportionately to income levels and the vacancy rate in the rental market is below 2% (3% is considered to be a positive level). This has left many Western Australians on a low or moderate income unable to access ongoing housing. In addition, over the last several years there has been an increase in the complexity and severity of issues with which people who are homeless present.

The Road Home outlined the need for new investment in homelessness and reform of existing services. Whilst this has been done to some extent by both state and federal governments, some of the criteria outlined in the Road Home will not be met unless the issue is approached and addressed differently. These criteria include that people who

experience homelessness should be supported to move quickly through the crisis system into long term housing and at the same time get help to reconnect with education, employment and the community.

At this time, and in the foreseeable future, there is limited long term housing, which is affordable, safe and secure, and which people who are in crisis or transitional accommodation can be supported to access. The affordable housing shortage in Western Australia needs to be addressed urgently and as quickly as possible. Building more affordable housing, more crisis accommodation, more transitional and supported accommodation inexpensively and quickly will provide existing services with exit points for current clients and allow new clients to be supported.

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