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Responding to Homelessness in the ACT



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Foreword

Yvette Berry, Deputy Chief Minister, Minister for Housing and Suburban Development, Minister for Education and Early Childhood Development, Minister for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence, Minister for Sport and Recreation, Minister for Women



A secure home is fundamental to a person's ability to participate in our community.

Without a home it is hard to get up in the morning to go to school; it is impossible to bring friends around to socialise, and it is very difficult to hold down a job. Without a roof over your head your health and wellbeing is compromised. The benefits of a stable home in an individual's life cannot be overstated.

Welcome to the November *Responding to Homelessness in the ACT* edition of *Parity*. The ACT Government has a long-standing commitment to addressing homelessness and has worked closely with our community partners. Together we have achieved a great deal along the way. I am proud of these achievements and welcome the opportunity to showcase them.

While the rate of homelessness rose nationally between the 2011 and 2016 Census, the ACT was one of the only jurisdictions in Australia to successfully reduce homelessness. We now have the fourth lowest rate of homelessness of all Australian

jurisdictions at 40.2 homeless persons per 10,000 head of population. While this is good progress, more needs to be done. Homelessness is a complex challenge which requires ongoing and wide-ranging responses.

The ACT's new *Housing Strategy 2018*, launched on 29 October, reflects the breadth of actions we are taking to tackle homelessness and housing affordability. These actions truly reflect the voice of the community. They were informed by an extensive seven-week consultation process that culminated in the 2017 Housing and Homelessness Summit. This consultation saw over 2,000 Canberrans participating in surveys, interviews and workshop sessions.

To support the goals of the strategy to reduce homelessness and strengthen social housing assistance, the Government will provide \$100 million in new investment to further

grow and renew public housing stock as well as provide new opportunities for growth in the community housing sector. In addition to the more than \$20 million in funding we provide to the specialist homelessness sector each year, we have committed more than \$6.5 million in additional funding to support frontline homelessness services, particularly focussing on women and children escaping domestic and family violence, older women and asylum seekers. This funding also includes expanding the reach of the ACT's central intake point (OneLink), for people where and when they need assistance.

There are many challenges in addressing homelessness and it is critical that we bring our collective expertise to bear in addressing homelessness. This edition of *Parity* is a fantastic platform to continue this discussion, and I am excited to see what comes out of the conversations.



Sanctuary by Gilda Redondo, 2015

Editorial

Jenny Smith, Chief Executive Officer, Council to Homeless Persons



This edition of *Parity* highlights the very recent and welcome release of the 2018 *Australian Capital Territory Housing Strategy*. This has been met with generally positive reactions from the sector, though its very recent release means there hasn't been time for its detailed consideration in this edition of *Parity*.

The Strategy explicitly recognises the important role that access to public and community housing plays in preventing and responding to homelessness, and includes both a 15 per cent target for social and affordable housing, and significant new funding (\$100 million) for public and community housing. This shows what state and territory governments can do, and should be a model to be emulated around the nation.

The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Government is also be commended for developing the Strategy through an in depth process of sector consultations and community discussion, that enables the way forward to build and improve on the strength and successes of the past.

As described in this edition, the ACT has many systemic approaches and service elements that contribute to its effectiveness. These include the Joint Pathways network of senior representatives from all the specialist housing and homelessness services in the ACT. As described in the article by Shannon Pickles from Havelock Housing, Joint Pathways has created a streamlined process to enable clients to access housing and accommodation vacancies without having to contact multiple agencies individually. Joint Pathways also provides an avenue for systemic advocacy, examining best practice solutions, networking, and training, and is an important forum for dialogue with the ACT Government.

While this level of collaboration, partnership and co-ordination is made easier by the relatively small size of the ACT, it nonetheless offers a positive approach to inform other jurisdictions.

The ACT specialist homelessness sector has also developed innovative and evidence informed responses to men who use violence in relationships, responding to both their need for accommodation and the need to change behaviour. This model *Room4Change* is described in the article by Nina Birkl.

These and many other strengths of the ACT specialist homelessness response, do not obviate the need for a broader response to address poverty and deliver affordable housing led by the Federal Government. Like other cities and regional areas with strong economies, and consequently high housing costs and low rental vacancies, the ACT is a difficult place to be on a low income and seeking secure housing.

As Kate Cvetanovski argues in her Opinion piece, the lack of access to affordable housing opportunities, and consequent increasing demand for homelessness services, places a heavy toll on the workers who must 'wage war' without all the tools they need. As Kate outlines, this task is now more difficult because of the need to commit considerable time to the process of supporting people to access the NDIS.

While the ACT will strengthen its responses with these new commitments to social housing, homelessness in the ACT cannot be ended without concerted national action. As Travis Gilbert argues, this must be part of a dedicated National Housing and Homelessness Strategy, and include a Social Housing Growth Fund to provide capital funds to increase the supply of social housing.

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CHP thanks all those involved in the edition Steering Committee, in particular: Travis Gilbert, Executive Officer, ACT Shelter and Stephanie Henry, Senior Policy Officer, Housing and Homelessness Strategy and Policy, Housing and Community Services, Community Services Directorate, ACT Government.

Introduction

Homing in on 2020: Revisiting Homelessness Responses and Funding in Australia and the Australian Capital Territory

Travis Gilbert, Executive Officer, ACT Shelter

Part I: Before the White Paper

In this two-part article I revisit funded homelessness responses to homelessness in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) over the past 45 years to provide some historical context for the inaugural *Responding to Homelessness in the ACT* edition of *Parity*.

The ACT has a long and proud track-record of responding to homelessness, and my contributions barely re-trace the steps of the many people, both in and outside of government, who have dedicated their personal and professional lives to responding to homelessness in Canberra and the ACT.

The Homeless Persons' Assistance Program

Dedicated programmatic government funding of homelessness services in Australia followed from the recommendations of the *Report of the Working Party on Homeless Men and Women* to the Minister for Social Security in June 1973. The Homeless Persons Assistance Act 1974, Australia's first dedicated homelessness legislation, gave effect to these recommendations and established the Homeless Persons' Assistance Program (HPAP).¹

The HPAP provided funding for homelessness services for adult men, families and women and children escaping domestic and family violence.

The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP)

SAAP, which commenced in 1985,² replaced a host of existing homelessness programs. SAAP was a joint Commonwealth-State Government program

that provided recurrent funding to more than 1,400 agencies providing services and assistance to people who were homeless or at risk of homelessness,³ including 49 services in the ACT. At the time of its last iteration, SAAP V, provided funding for a five-year period from 2000 to 2007.

On average, the Commonwealth provided approximately 55 per cent of total SAAP funding with the remaining 45 per cent coming from the states and territories. In 1997-98 a total of \$224 million (\$125 million Commonwealth/\$99 million State/Territory) was provided for SAAP. By the final year of the program (2007-08), this increased to \$400.4 million.

The Supported Accommodation Assistance Program Act 1994 defined a 'homeless' person as follows:

For the purposes of this Act, a person is homeless if, and only if, he or she has inadequate access to safe and secure housing. (Section 4)

The Act included an important definition of 'inadequate access to safe and secure housing':

For the purposes of the Act, a person is considered to have inadequate access to safe and secure housing if the only housing to which the person has access:

- *damages, or is likely to damage, the person's health; or*
- *threatens the person's safety; or*
- *marginalises the person through failing to provide access to:*
 - *adequate personal amenities; or*
 - *the economic and social supports that a home normally affords; or*

- *places the person in circumstances which threaten or adversely affect the adequacy, safety, security and affordability of that housing.*⁴

This definition as well as Chamberlain and MacKenzie's *Cultural Definition of Homelessness*⁵ would later influence both the 2004 ACT Homelessness Strategy and our *Human Rights Act*.⁶

Homelessness: A Capital Problem

The Crisis Accommodation Program (CAP)

The CAP was included under the ambit of the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement.

The CAP was a Commonwealth program that provided capital funding to allow the purchase of bricks and mortar to accommodate people who were in crisis and experiencing homelessness. CAP funding allowed the purchase of dwellings to accommodate SAAP clients.

ACT CAP funding increased from \$650,000 per year in 1986-87 to \$800,000 per year in 1996-97. It remained at this level through to 2002-2003 and increased to just over \$850,000 per year by the time CAP funds were rolled into the 2008 National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA).

Towards 2000: On for Young and Old

Reconnect and its Predecessor

As well as targeted support for youth homelessness under the ambit of SAAP, and the provision of income support measures such as Youth Allowance, there were other initiatives funded by the

Commonwealth aimed at alleviating homelessness among young people. In 1996, a Prime Ministerial Youth Taskforce was established and a Youth Homelessness Pilot Program was trialled.

The pilot program ended in 1999, but was then replaced by the Reconnect Program, a new Youth Homelessness Early Intervention Program.

There are still three Reconnect services in the ACT with a particularly important element of the program being Participatory Action Research.

The Family Home: Family Homelessness Initiatives

The Commonwealth also provided funding for a range of other initiatives/strategies aimed at preventing homelessness.

In the ACT, this included:

- the Family Relationships Services Program which provides counselling and mediation support for families via three community organisations.
- the Partnerships Against Domestic Violence Strategy which provided \$460,000 per annum to the ACT. This funding was allocated by the Carnell Government to programs designed to help prevent domestic violence, one of the key drivers of homelessness for women and children in the ACT.
- the National Crime Prevention Program — this program was used by the Carnell government to fund the ACT's High-Density Housing Program that continues today.

Breaking the Cycle: The 2004 ACT Homelessness Strategy

The ACT has a long track record of working within the national and local context to respond to homelessness. Prior to 2004, this was achieved by leveraging off federal money for programs that responded to housing need and the drivers of homelessness — including those described above, as well as the Assistance with Care and Housing for the Aged (ACHA) program.

After undertaking a Needs Analysis of Homelessness in the ACT in 2002, the ACT Government launched the 2004 ACT Homelessness Strategy Breaking the Cycle, four years before

the Commonwealth appropriated those words in its Homelessness White Paper, *The Road Home*.

The Vision

'...All Canberrans have the right to safe, secure, affordable and appropriate accommodation with the necessary supports to live as independently as possible within our community...'

'...To achieve this vision, the ACT community will work together to respond to the needs of people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness to minimise the occurrence of homelessness and its impacts and to adequately resource and maintain facilities for those experiencing homelessness...'⁷

Themes

Five key themes would underpin the 2004 ACT Homelessness Strategy:

1. integrated and effective service responses
2. client focus and client outcomes
3. access to appropriate housing and housing assistance
4. supporting and driving innovation and excellence
5. implementation, monitoring and review.

The ground-breaking 2004 ACT Homelessness Strategy meant the ACT was well prepared for the arrival of a new national approach to homelessness in 2008, *The Road Home* — Australia's first ever White Paper on homelessness.⁸

Part 2: After the White Paper

The Road Home was paved with good intentions...

The Road Home committed the Australian, state and territory governments to the achievement of a more integrated 'whole of government' response to homelessness. The Paper:

- advocated that reducing homelessness is 'everyone's responsibility'
- asserted that in order to reduce homelessness significantly we need to strike the right balance between early intervention and prevention and breaking the cycles of recurrent and chronic homelessness

- identified the need for mainstream agencies and services to assume greater responsibility for identifying and responding to homelessness
- articulated the need for long-term solutions to end homelessness for people — principally 'housing first' initiatives for people who had slept outside for long periods and/or cycled through crisis accommodation, couch surfing, marginal, inadequate housing tenures, to the street and back again
- advocated improving and expanding services
- included dedicated funding to strengthen the evidence base that underpins policy, program and service delivery responses through expanded data collection and a dedicated homelessness research agenda.

It contained seven strategies to support the vision, with the three most significant in terms of funding identified as:

1. breaking the cycle of homelessness
2. turning off the tap — preventing exits into homelessness and a greater focus on prevention and early intervention
3. improving and expanding services.

It was hoped that this would achieve the headline goals of halving overall homelessness and offering supported accommodation to all rough sleepers who needed it by 2020.

Travelling Companions on *The Road Home*

The National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA)

The NAHA was an agreement between Australia's Commonwealth, state and territory governments that committed to achieve the following outcomes:

- people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness achieve sustainable housing and social inclusion
- people are able to rent housing that meets their needs
- people can purchase affordable housing
- people have access to housing through an efficient and responsive housing market

- Indigenous people have the same housing opportunities (in relation to homelessness services, housing rental, housing purchase and access to housing through an efficient and responsive housing market) as other Australians
- Indigenous people have improved housing amenity and reduced overcrowding, particularly in remote areas and discrete communities.

The NAHA started on 1 January 2009 and was superseded in 2018 by the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA). The ACT has fared particularly badly under the NHHA because of its per capita funding model.

The ACT Government, to its credit, has historically over-invested in both public housing and homelessness service provision — relative to most states (but on par with the Northern Territory). This leaves us short-changed under a per capita funding model.

The National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (2009–2017)

The National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH), which started in January 2009 was designed to support the outcomes in the NAHA, but was time limited and funded separately from it.

It aimed to help people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness achieve sustainable housing and social inclusion, in particular, by funding frontline homelessness services. The states and territories were responsible for determining where homeless services were located, how they were provided and their level of funding.

The Roadmap: 2009–2014

The ACT Homelessness Implementation Plan included \$110 million in NPAH funding over five years from 2009–2014 and just under \$3 million in funding for the *A Place to Call Home* initiative.⁹

The Roadmap — the ACT Government response to the White Paper, was released in 2009 after consultations were held with homelessness service providers in the ACT, ACT Shelter, Joint Pathways and Community Legal Centres ACT.¹⁰

The ACT established a *Street to Home* service that provides assertive outreach to people sleeping rough and seeks to support people to access stable housing.

The ACT also implemented a version of the successful New South Wales program the Housing and Support Initiative (HASI) which provides specialist mental health and social support to assist people with mental health conditions to stay housed and participate fully in the community.

In addition, the ACT developed the *Managed Exits Program* that provided supported accommodation for people exiting the Alexander McConochie Centre that contributed to the NPAH outcome of preventing exits into homelessness.

A youth housing/education and training model applying the principles of the successful *Foyer* model was funded that continues to support 20 young people at a time by providing long-term housing with security of tenure in exchange for participation in education and training activities or employment.

The ACT component of the Social Housing Initiative was used to construct 421 homes dedicated to Canberrans experiencing homelessness or escaping family violence to ensure that there were increased exit points from homelessness services.

There was a focus on enabling women and children to remain safely in the family home following domestic and family violence. This applies the principles of the Safe at Home models and brings together ACT policing, justice, specialist domestic violence services and the Department of Housing and Human Services (DHHS).

In addition, the ACT Government established *First Point*, a single access gateway to homelessness services and social housing in the ACT. In 2016, *First Point* became *OneLink*, with a new provider and an expanded role providing a central access point, not just for housing and homelessness, but a wide range of human services.

One of the key strengths of *First Point* is that people now know where to go to access homelessness services and social housing in the ACT, and we now

have a central collection point for data that tells us about the demographics of people experiencing homelessness in the ACT who seek assistance from Specialist Homelessness Services.

The ACT Government has provided funding for the establishment of Street Law a legal service for people experiencing housing instability and homelessness. The service has already experienced strong demand for its legal services and has determined that many people need their services because, for a variety of reasons, their cases will not be taken on board by other legal services and because legal aid has a full case load.¹¹

Structural Faults: The National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA)

On a positive note, the NHHA requires the ACT to have a Housing Strategy and the previous time limited National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness funding was rolled in to an indexed, ongoing funding agreement.

On the flipside, it perpetuates the per capita funding model of its predecessor, meaning the Commonwealth investment in maintaining public housing and homelessness services in the ACT looks set to decline further from the current pitiful proportion of just 17 per cent.

I want to close off this overview of homelessness policy by repeating our urgent key ask of the Commonwealth:

1. Undertake an independent audit of all homes owned and managed by state and territory governments.
2. Once confident in the analysis of stock numbers, request data from the ACT Government on the mean maintenance and repair costs per public housing dwelling and allocate an operational subsidy equivalent to that amount (subject to indexation) on a per dwelling basis.
3. Establish a nationally competitive Social Housing Growth Fund and provide capital funds to support a planned and ongoing increase in the supply of social housing going forward.

State/Territory	ACT
NPAH Commonwealth funding annual amount	\$1.5 million
Estimated number of clients NPAH supports	Assessment/Intake/Referral: 1,643 people (please see below estimates by program) Housing Outcomes: Homelessness Prevention 631 people
Estimated number of workers NPAH provides employment to	60
Services funded under the NPAH — generalist	First Point (1,643 people assisted in 2014–15) Supportive Tenancy Service x 1 (631 people) Managed Accommodation Program x 1 (15 people) Street to Home x 1 (57 people) Transitional Support and Head Tenancies x 6 (214 people) HASI x 4 (33 accommodation and support packages)
Services funded under the NPAH — domestic and family violence	Heira DFV Supported Accommodation x 1
Services funded under the NPAH — youth	Youth Integrated Education and Accommodation Program (Our Place — FOYER-like) (36 people)
Services funded under the NPAH — other	Central Intake Service (First Point/One Link) Matched funding from the NPAH was allocated to the 'First Point' Central Intake Service until 30/6/16. On 1 July 2016, its functions/clients were transferred to <i>OneLink</i> — the gateway to all human services in the ACT.
Impact of the NPAH on the overall response to homelessness	The 'per capita' funding model used to apportion funds to states and territories via the Affordable Housing SPP punishes jurisdictions like the ACT with high proportions of public housing. The ACT's NAHA allocation amounts to less than 20 per cent of the operational costs of social housing and homelessness services. Securing federal NPAH funding is therefore critical for us. The NPAH matched funding allocation (\$1.52 million from the Commonwealth, \$1.52 million from the ACT) accounts for 16 per cent of the annual budget allocation to ACT homelessness services. It provides vital funding for assessment/intake, housing focused programs aimed at either ending or preventing homelessness and critical integrated support for survivors of family violence. The impact of the removal of funding on the lives of the thousands of Canberrans who rely on NPAH funded services, by contrast would be enormous.

4. Develop more appropriate cost-ratios for funding homelessness services according to local conditions, drivers and structural determinants, to meet the true costs of service delivery.
5. Implement these measures as part of a dedicated National Housing and Homelessness Strategy, developed and implemented in partnership with consumers, community and industry stakeholders and overseen by a Cabinet level Minister for Housing.

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11. Gilbert T 2012, *Making the Grade: Homelessness Australia's Report Card on the Implementation of The Road Home: A National Approach to Homelessness*, Homelessness Australia, Canberra, pp.50-52.
12. This table is an Advocacy Brief produced by ACT Shelter when we thought the National Affordable Housing Agreement was being abolished and the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness was about to expire for a third time.

Specialist Homelessness Services in the ACT

Christopher Humphrey, Housing and Homelessness Reporting and Development Unit, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

On any given day in 2016–17, across the Australian Capital Territory (ACT):

42 Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) agencies supported over 1,500 clients¹

- 326 of these clients were young people presenting alone²
- 459 were children in families being supported
- 299 clients spent the night sleeping in crisis accommodation
- 605 clients reporting a current mental health issue received support
- 631 clients experiencing domestic and family violence received support
- eight clients received support for the first time and 11 cases were closed, with 73 per cent of closed cases having secure housing.
- The *SHS Annual Report 2016–17*,³ produced by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), is the sixth annual report using data from the Specialist Homelessness Services Collection (SHSC). It describes the characteristics of clients of SHS, the services requested, outcomes achieved, and unmet requests for services during 2016–17.

Quick Facts for the ACT (2016–17)

- 4,585 clients were assisted, representing two per cent of the national SHS population (288,273 total clients)
- one in two (46 per cent) were homeless; 54 per cent were at risk of homelessness when seeking services
- nine in ten (86 per cent) clients at risk of homelessness were assisted to remain housed
- one in two (53 per cent) clients who were homeless were assisted into housing.

How Many People Were Assisted in 2016–17?

One in 88 people in the ACT received homelessness assistance, lower than the national rate (one in 84). The ACT rate includes clients who may reside outside the ACT.

The top three reasons for clients seeking assistance were:

6. housing crisis (47 per cent, compared with 44 per cent nationally)
7. financial difficulties (39 per cent, compared with 38 per cent nationally)
8. relationship/family breakdown (38 per cent, compared with 21 per cent nationally).

The number of SHS clients in the ACT has been steadily declining since the first year of data collection in 2011–12 (Figure 1). The number of new clients presenting to SHS services has declined more rapidly than the number of returning clients.⁴ (All clients were classified as new in 2011–12, regardless of

whether they had accessed the previous program, the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) prior to 2011–12).

The ACT has a lower proportion of Indigenous SHS clients compared with the national average (Table 1, overleaf). However, Indigenous people access SHS at a higher rate in the ACT than the national average (882.8 per 10,000 of the population in the ACT, compared to 813.9 nationally).

Clients seeking support in the ACT were more likely to be living alone, employed, or in education/training compared to all SHS clients (Table 1).

A higher proportion of SHS clients in the ACT needed accommodation in 2016–17 compared nationally (72 per cent and 56 per cent respectively), and a higher proportion of clients received accommodation (see Table 1). ACT SHS provided a median length of accommodation (nights) three times higher than the national median and provided a median length of support (days) over twice the national median.

Number of clients

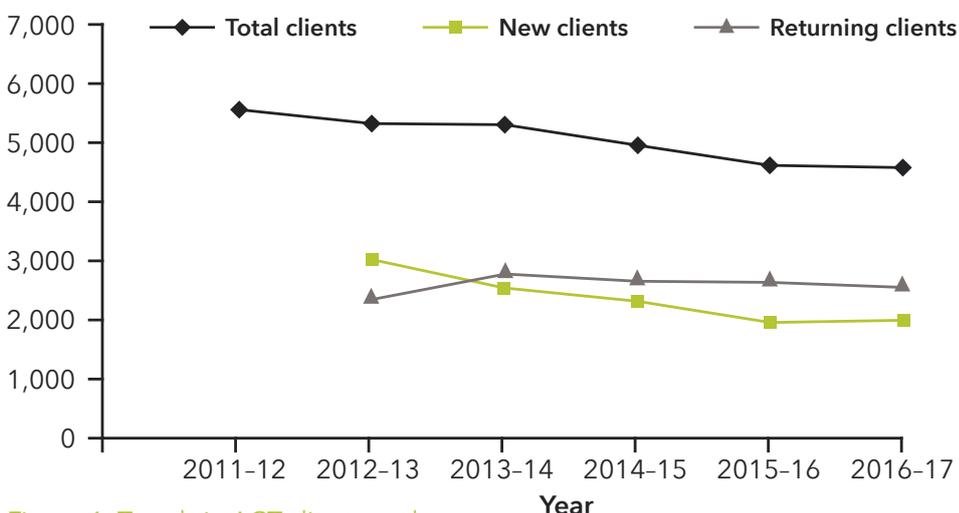


Figure 1: Trends in ACT client numbers

Table 1 : Australian Capital Territory client characteristics, 2016-17

		ACT	Australia
Sex (%)	Male	43	40
	Female	57	60
Indigenous (%)		16	25
Remoteness (%)	Major cities	99	62
	Inner regional	1	23
	Outer regional	—	11
	Remote and very remote	..	5
Living arrangements (%)	Living alone	35	29
	One parent with child/ren	34	35
	Couple with child/ren	12	13
	Couple without child/ren	3	5
	Other family group	16	18
Labour force (%)	Employed	17	11
	Unemployed	45	48
	Not in labour force	38	41
Education status (%)	Education/training	25	22
	Not in education/training	75	78
Median length of support (days)		83	37
Median length of accommodation (nights)		100	33
Proportion receiving accommodation (%)		39	30

— nil or rounded to zero
 .. not applicable
 Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.
 Sources: SHSC National and ACT supplementary tables 2016-17.

Source: SHSC (AIHW 2018)



Moving House by Maryanne Bailey, 2015

Accommodation Services

Of the 3,323 clients who needed accommodation in the ACT in 2016-17, two-thirds (67 per cent) were either provided with accommodation (1,885 clients) or referred (354 clients) to accommodation services. Clients may need one or more forms of accommodation. Of those who needed accommodation:

- 51 per cent (1,214) were provided short-term/emergency accommodation
- 30 per cent (573) were provided medium-term/transitional accommodation
- 11 per cent (225) were provided long-term housing.

Main Source of Income (ACT SHS clients 2016-17)

At the close of support, 492 clients (15 per cent) earned income from employment, up from 13 per cent prior to support. A further 2,492 clients (75 per cent) were receiving a government payment as their main source of income (up from 71 per cent), 87 clients (three per cent) were awaiting government benefits (down from five per cent) and 232 clients (seven per cent) reported nil income (down from ten per cent).

Housing Outcomes (ACT 2016-17)

For the 2,710 clients with a known housing situation at the end of support:

- 1,051 clients (39 per cent) were housed in public or community housing
- 772 clients (29 per cent) were housed in private housing
 - 801 clients (30 per cent) were considered homeless.

Endnotes

1. The number of agencies reporting data to AIHW does not necessarily cover the full amount of services in operation in the ACT.
2. Young people presenting alone are aged 15 to 24. Children are aged 0 to 17. These two groups are mutually exclusive.
3. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2018. *Specialist homelessness services annual report 2016-17*. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/specialist-homelessness-services-2016-17/contents/contents>
4. New SHS clients are clients who have not received support in a previous year. Returning clients are clients who have had support in a previous year.

An overview of Homelessness in the ACT

2016 census night

1,596

homeless people were in the ACT



81% drop from 2011

50% of people homeless on census night

were staying in

supported accommodation.

This is the highest proportion of any Australian Jurisdiction

Homelessness among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the ACT dropped from

261 in 2011



95 in 2016

In 2016-17 **48** specialist homelessness programs assisted **4,585** individuals

36% experienced **mental health** issues

35% experienced **domestic violence**

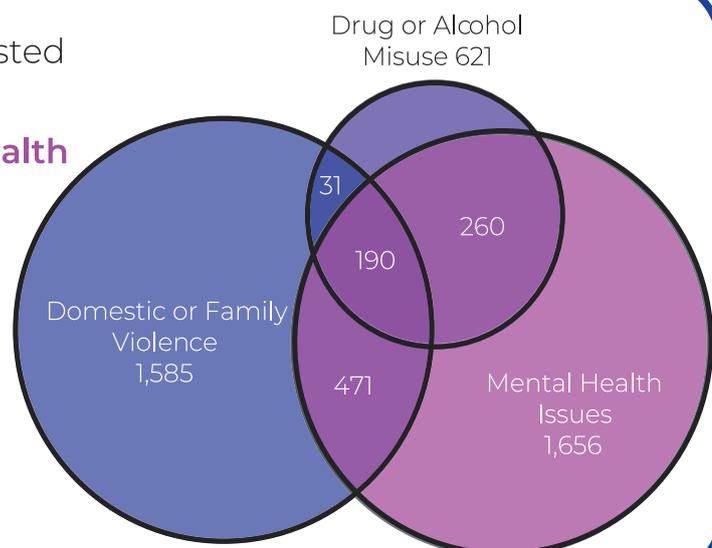
14% experienced **drug or alcohol misuse**

6% exited custody

4% needed **disability** assistance

3% exited care

Many individuals faced more than one of these vulnerabilities



The average length of support provided by Specialist Homelessness Services per client in the ACT is **double the national average**



Early intervention has worked

51% of people who presented to the SHS sector were homeless in 2015-16

down 306 individuals

45% of people who presented to the SHS sector were homeless in 2016-17

Homelessness and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services in the ACT — A Data Snapshot

Housing and community Services Directorate, ACT Government

Specialist Homelessness Services Collection¹

In 2016–17, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people accessed homelessness services primarily for:

- accommodation provision: 69.1 per cent
- assistance to sustain an existing tenancy: 34.3 per cent
- general services: 94 per cent

General services include:

- advice or information — 81.1 per cent
- advocacy — 54.7 per cent
- material aid or brokerage — 36.7 per cent
- assistance for domestic or family violence — 28.3 per cent
- financial information — 26.2 per cent
- living skills or development — 20.1 per cent
- transport — 19.4 per cent
- meals — 14.7 per cent.

In general, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients were younger than the non-Indigenous clients. Nearly one third (32.8 per cent) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients were children aged 17 and under in 2016–17. Approximately another third (31.1 per cent) aged from 18 to 29 years old. Just over one third (36.0 per cent) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients were aged 30 and over, compared to 44.8 per cent of non-Indigenous clients.

Census²

According to the *ABS Census 2016*, there were 95 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders people homeless on Census night.

While the number and rate of homeless Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people reduced dramatically between the 2011 and 2016 Census, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders still had much higher rates of homelessness compared with non-Indigenous people.

The three main types of homelessness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ACT were:

- sleeping rough** — 6.3 per cent compared to 3.3 per cent of non-indigenous people who are homelessness.
- staying in support accommodation** — 66.3 per cent compared to 40.9 per cent of non-indigenous people who are homelessness.
- staying temporarily with other households** — 23.2 per cent compared to 21.3 per cent of non-Indigenous people who are homelessness.

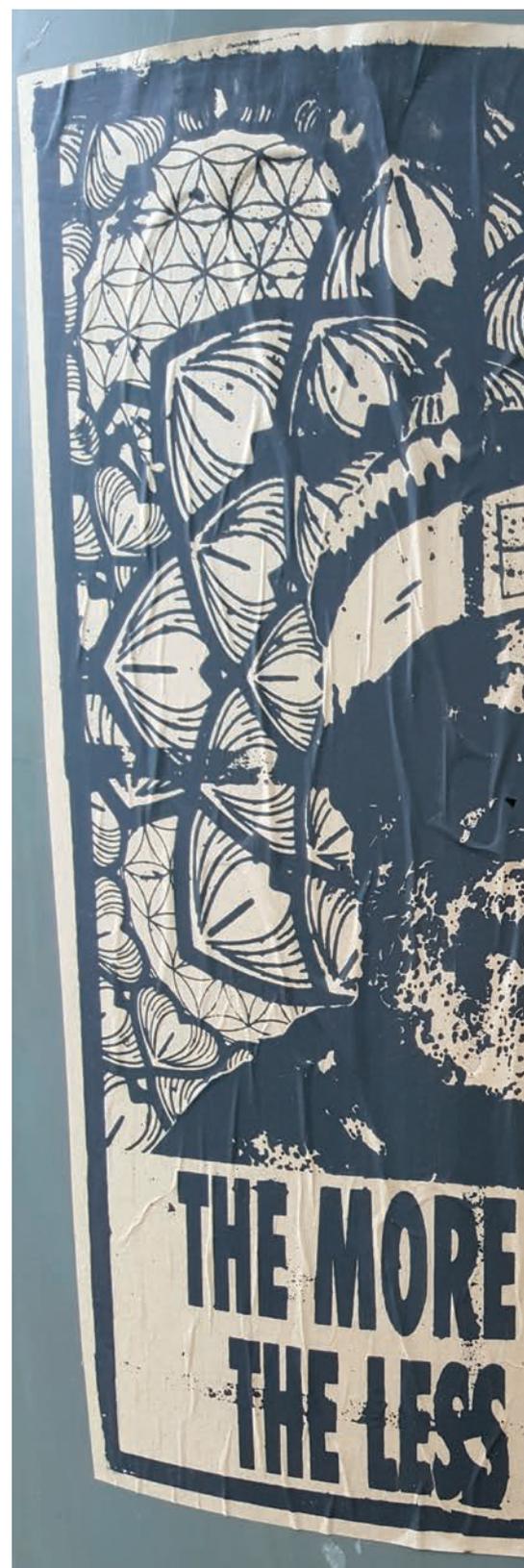
Endnotes

1. AIHW, *Specialist Homelessness Services Collection, 2016–17*
2. ABS, *Census 2016*

Table 1: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander homelessness in the ACT

	2011	2016
Aboriginal &/or Torres Strait Islander origin (no.)	260	95
Neither Aboriginal nor Torres Strait Islander origin (no.)	1,294	1,211
Not stated (no.)	233	318
Proportion of Aboriginal &/or Torres Strait Islander people who are homeless (%)	15.0	6.0
Total Homeless persons in the ACT (no.)	1,738	1,596

Source: ABS Census 2016





ACT Services

The ACT Government funds a wide range of services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people:

Gugan Gulwan — Youth Aboriginal Corporation

This service provides outreach support and case management for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

Winnunga Nimmityjah — Housing Liaison Service

This service provides information advice and advocacy to support service users to access appropriate housing options and support people to sustain their tenancies.

Winnunga Nimmityjah — Home Maintenance Program

This service provides home maintenance assistance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tenants who are at risk of eviction from their Housing ACT property; and offers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people involved in the criminal justice system opportunity to develop work skills in home maintenance assistance.

Toora — Indigenous Boarding House Network

This service supports Aboriginal and/ or Torres Strait Islander families experiencing homelessness. Specifically, the service is contracted to provide support services and tenancy/property management.

Toora — Indigenous Program

This service supports Indigenous families in all their diversity who are at risk of, or experiencing homelessness. Specifically, the service is contracted to provide support services and tenancy/property management.

ACTCOSS — Gulanga Program

The Gulanga Program supports government funded homelessness services to develop and improve upon culturally appropriate practice standards. This includes a service to improve the cultural competence of services working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their families.

Chapter 1: The ACT Government Housing Strategy

The ACT Housing Strategy 2018

'Housing fulfils the basic human need for shelter and performs a social function by contributing to the wellness of a household.'

— ACT Housing Strategy

On October 29, 2018, the new *ACT Housing Strategy* was launched by ACT Chief Minister Andrew Barr and Deputy Chief Minister Yvette Berry. The strategy sets out the ACT's 10 year strategic plan to address homelessness and housing to meet the needs of all Canberrans.

The ACT Government understands that secure and suitable housing is the foundation for full and active participation in our community

and impacts health and wellbeing. This challenge is not just one for Government. The strategy builds on the ACT Government's long history of working with the community to identify and deliver solutions to strengthen housing assistance and address housing affordability in Canberra.

While rent in Canberra is relatively affordable for those on average incomes, the strategy recognises that what is affordable for people on the ACT's high average wages is not affordable for those on lower incomes. Vulnerable Canberrans in the private market can find themselves in housing stress.

There are significant affordability challenges to be faced. Almost 8,000 low income households are at an increased risk of homelessness, paying more than 30 per cent of their income on rent.

Consultation Process

In creating our new strategy, the ACT Government undertook an unprecedented level of consultation to hear the views of sector experts and community members. Over 2,000 Canberrans participated in these discussions across multiple platforms including online surveys, community workshops and drop-ins, small group interviews and written submissions.



ACT Chief Minister Andrew Barr and Deputy Chief Minister Yvette Berry launch the *ACT Housing Strategy*, 29 October 2018

The Five Housing Strategy Goals and Objectives

An Equitable, Diverse and Sustainable Supply of Housing for the ACT Community

- Provide land and housing development opportunities to meet demands
- Set a 15 per cent target for social and affordable housing.
- Establish a healthy land and housing development pipeline.
- Provide a diverse mix of housing types and choice.
- Facilitate innovative design and delivery mechanisms.
- Encourage well designed, environmentally sustainable and accessible housing.

Reducing Homelessness

- Build strong ACT Government and community sector partnerships to effectively address homelessness in the ACT.
- Intervene early and reduce the intergenerational impacts of homelessness.
- Address gaps in our services system and respond to new and emerging groups vulnerable to homelessness.
- Improve pathways out of homelessness.
- Develop a strong and sustainable homelessness services sector supported to enhance workforce and organisational capability.
- Establish an integrated and coordinated human services system across the ACT Government.

Strengthening Social Housing Assistance

- Grow and renew social housing to better meet demand.
- Build a range of housing options that are better designed to meet diverse and contemporary tenant needs.
- Develop a tenancy service that focuses on client outcomes and responds to individual needs.
- Provide a better customer experience through a modern and digital service platform for current and future tenants.

Increasing Affordable Rental Housing

- Grow and diversify the community housing sector.
- Grow the supply of affordable private rental properties.
- Strengthen rights and protections for tenants.
- Provide targeted advice and support to tenants and landlords.
- Target programs to increase supply of affordable housing for vulnerable and disadvantaged households.

Increasing affordable Home Ownership

- Provide more affordable homes for purchase.
- Increase home ownership through alternative finance and occupancy models.

This process culminated in the ACT Housing and Homelessness Summit held in October 2017.

Feedback from the consultation process directly informed the ACT Housing Strategy, which outlines clear goals, and actions for how these will be achieved. The strategy is a commitment to Canberrans that will make a positive difference in housing supply and diversity, affordable housing and homelessness in the ACT.

ACT Housing Strategy

The ACT Housing Strategy will encourage and promote a housing market that meets the diverse and changing needs of the Canberra community, and enables a sustainable supply of housing for individuals and families at all income levels. The ACT Housing Strategy focuses on five goals, and actions to implement these to address issues across the housing continuum.

Reducing Homelessness

While the strategy targets people's needs across the housing continuum, many of the key actions specifically address the needs of people currently experiencing, or at risk of homelessness. The ACT Housing Strategy commits to reducing homelessness and strengthening the capacity of the specialist homelessness sector to better respond to the Territory's most vulnerable people.



Some Canberrans remain in crisis accommodation simply because they cannot afford the private rental market. Others face physical or psychosocial barriers which prevent them from sustaining a tenancy independently. The strategy will support work to provide clearer pathways out of homelessness services. By increasing affordable housing options we can free up crisis accommodation for those who need it, when they need it, as well as provide pathways out for those who no longer do. Establishing a diverse range of housing in the ACT is vital to meet the individual needs of our most vulnerable community members.

An example of where this strategy is currently working is our Common Ground initiative. Of the 20 social tenants who transitioned from chronic homelessness during 2017-18, ten are currently engaged in some form of employment, and seven are actively participating in or have completed ongoing education and training. Building on this success, we have committed to building a second Common Ground in Dickson.

Early Engagement and Client Focus

Access to early supports and programs are crucial to minimise negative impacts of homelessness. The ACT Government is dedicated to working with the community sector to help people before they fall into

crisis, by assisting them to remain in their own homes. We recognise that the experience of homelessness can worsen a person's existing trauma, mental, and physical health issues. This is particularly true for children and young people who are then at greater risk of homelessness as adults. Domestic and family violence are key drivers of homelessness affecting women and children, which is why the ACT Government has committed to a cross agency and whole of community approach to addressing this issue for better, joined up services.

As Canberra's population changes, the needs of those at risk of homelessness are also changing. Homelessness affects people from different cultures, backgrounds and ages, but some groups are particularly at risk of becoming homeless, such as older women in financial crisis. Refugees and asylum seekers who are living in the community while awaiting decisions on their immigration status often face challenges in finding secure accommodation. Our policies and programs are shaped to address the complex needs of our at-risk groups and respond to gaps in our current services.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples remain over-represented in our homelessness population. The ACT Government is committed to providing culturally appropriate social housing accommodation and

support programs. We will work with the community to increase availability of culturally appropriate housing. This includes the delivery of a dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older persons' complex.

Increase and Upgrade Housing Stock

Nationally, the demand for social housing continues to outpace supply, and although the ACT has the highest per capita supply of social housing in Australia, we are still no exception. We are committed to growing and renewing our social housing, and will deliver a plan to do so. To support this plan the ACT Government is investing an additional \$100 million investment for growth and renewal of our public housing stock.

We will also build a range of alternative social housing options that offer choice and security for people as their needs and family circumstances change. We will also continue to support diverse and vibrant communities through our 'salt and peppering' of social housing across all areas of Canberra

The ACT Government is developing a new holistic model of social housing that puts client needs at the centre of the solution. We will continue to grow and renew our public housing, by providing measurable targets against which future success can be measured. The ACT Government has dedicated at least 15 per cent of the Indicative Land Release Program each year to affordable, community and public housing targets. This action builds on our previous commitment to improving housing affordability through targeted land release.

Improve Affordability

The new higher overall housing target will enable the release of an indicative 2,550 dwelling sites for public, community and affordable housing over the next four years. This will increase availability of affordable dwellings and reduce pressure on low-income households.

The strategy demonstrates a clear and significant commitment to grow and diversify the community housing sector. We will work in partnership with community housing providers to develop more affordable rental properties. At the same time, we

will investigate reducing the cost of land to address the yield gap that exists in renting properties at a reduced market rate. This will increase the stock of affordable properties available for lower income households, and reduce financial stress and risk of homelessness.

The ACT Government will also encourage alternative ownership and occupancy housing models. The Innovation Fund, supports innovative projects that will increase the supply of affordable housing for low income households. Projects will showcase the collaborative effort between industry, service providers and Government. So far, round one of the program will see funding allocated to support three projects around not-for-profit rental management and co-housing.

The second round of funding seeks to support a project that responds to the housing and accommodation needs of families escaping domestic violence, and will provide equivalent funding for a development project for people living with a disability. Pilot projects will provide feedback on these approaches, to see if there is value in continuing and increasing these types of accommodation programs into future years. The strategy establishes priority categories that will provide greater access to home ownership and low cost private rental opportunities for vulnerable and disadvantaged households, reducing risk of homelessness for affected households.

Improve Industry Capacity

Homelessness is a complex issue and responses to homelessness span our human services system, from health and justice, through to child youth and family services. Having a coordinated and integrated approach across all areas of government will improve our ability to support people who need it most. We will work harder across the ACT Government to provide a holistic response to homelessness, particularly for those exiting institutions or care arrangements.

Our social housing system is not just about houses — it is also about people. In the ACT, our role as a social housing provider extends beyond just tenancy management. We are looking

to develop a new way of delivering services that give our tenants greater flexibility and choice to find a home that meets their needs. As part of this new service delivery approach, we will build a Modern Social Landlord Framework with people at the centre.

Additionally, we are committed to strengthening our Human Services Gateway (OneLink) to reach out to people and be available at the times when people need help. To increase capacity of our frontline services, we have committed an additional \$6.5million in funding above the existing \$20million funding per year, allocated to frontline homelessness services.

We are committed to supporting our homelessness services sector and increasing their capacity to respond to those who need it most. We will work with the sector to support professional development and training as well as invest in better data and analysis to support the sector to evaluate and improve program delivery. We have always strived to work closely with the community and the community sector. Through the strategy, we will continue to build on our strong community sector partnerships. This includes a commitment to work with the community to co-design our new policies and programs and bring the voices of those who have a lived experience of homelessness to shape our approach.

Implementation

The strategy is a whole-of-government effort. Collaboration is key to ensuring the needs of Canberrans are well understood. To promote this vision for our city, we will continue to collaborate with key government agencies and consider the diverse views of tenants, community members, businesses and organisations to address housing affordability in Canberra.

The new ACT Housing Strategy informs and supports other ACT Government strategies to enable better integrated outcomes across a broad range of services to the community. We have also launched a dedicated Homes and Housing website, which provide a central online location for information about the services, programs and policies designed to support our commitment to affordable and accessible housing. The website will help the community know where to go for help, advice, information and support, or to discuss their ideas. As part of the implementation of the strategy, we will also undertake ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the actions in our implementation plan.

View <<https://www.act.gov.au/homes-housing/act-housing-strategy>> for copies of the ACT Housing Strategy 2018 and ACT Housing Strategy Implementation Plan.



Building Communities, Boosting Self-esteem, Reducing Recidivism

ACT Government Justice and Community Safety Directorate

The period post prison release is the most critical in terms of getting life back on track, building self-esteem and feeling socially connected — factors which reduce the chances of recidivism. Having stable accommodation within a connected community during this time can provide the foundations for a successful transition. The High Density Housing Safety and Community program model developed in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) for people living at public housing sites is a successful example of this approach. It has shown that by supporting vulnerable communities to become more resilient and connected, we can decrease and even prevent crime from taking place, improving safety and wellbeing for all public housing tenants—not just former detainees.

The High Density Housing Safety and Community program has been running and funded by ACT Government since 2008. Delivered by Reclink Australia, the program is a multi-agency initiative across Justice and Community Safety, ACT Policing, Housing ACT, and ACT Health designed to improve social inclusion, community participation, and safety for residents living in public housing in the centre of Canberra.

As a partnership focussed on community building, this program targets a section of the population released from custody who have experienced particular disadvantage and live in high density complexes within the ACT. This partnership demonstrates a joined-up government response which brings in services for people who are disadvantaged to enable them to return to full participation in a strong and safe community.

People leaving custody may be more likely to experience a significant range of disadvantages, including health and mental health issues, a sense of social isolation or exclusion, and difficulty finding an affordable place to live. Without ongoing support, these factors can create a vicious cycle of homelessness and offending, which also has impacts on the broader community. One way to address this is through targeted participation-based community development programs.

Using community development approaches, the program has delivered a number of supportive initiatives including community gardens, a wood workshop, a laundry program, neighbourhood chat program and a bridge-to-bridge monthly 'run, roll or walk' event at Lake Burley Griffin. Activities such as community gardening improve the overall wellbeing of all participating residents, by bringing them together to grow their own food while supporting vulnerable families to feel safe and connected.

The small team, led by Reclink Program Manager Mark Ransome, work to promote community safety, develop pro-social and law-abiding community engagement, and facilitate access to services related to justice, health, mental health, education, and employment — all of which are closely linked to homelessness.

An evaluation report undertaken by the Australian Institute of Criminology shows that the program is providing broader social benefits of increased participation in education and paid employment, stabilising mental health and reducing risk of homelessness. Through the program, violent crime has been reduced by 50 per cent, property crime has been reduced by 60 per cent and

police attendance for disturbances has been reduced by 49 per cent at the public housing site in Ainslie Avenue. Importantly, for many tenants the program is helping to build resilience, alleviate boredom and supports them to acquire new skills.

For more information about the Justice and Community Safety Directorate led High Density Housing Safety and Community program, visit http://www.justice.act.gov.au/criminal_and_civil_justice/justice_programs/crime_prevention/high_density_housing_safety_project.

The evaluation report can be found at <https://aic.gov.au/publications/rr/rr6>



Responding to the Housing Strategy

Homelessness, social housing and welfare sector leaders were asked to give a brief 'first response' to the recently released 2018 ACT Housing Strategy.

**Richard Griffiths,
Safe Shelter Coordinating
Committee**

Goal 2, Reducing Homelessness, is based on early intervention, but does not say how that early intervention will be achieved. Except for those who become homeless while already in the care of welfare agencies or in public housing, where their situation may be known, the first indication of the problem for many will probably be when they

are on the streets or in their cars or couch surfing. The question is therefore: 'How will those people be moved off the streets before their homelessness becomes entrenched?'

**Susan Helyar,
Director ACTCOSS**

The commitment by the ACT Government to spend \$100 million on growing supply and renovating public housing is excellent. This level of investment is much higher proportionally than investments in affordable housing announced several years ago in New South Wales and this year in Victoria. Public housing growth and renewal is so vital it needs to be actioned promptly.

The ACT 2019-20 Budget will need to specify what investments will be made and in what timeframe, to deliver on all the actions outlined in the Strategy.

Progress in each action area will need to be independently assessed and evaluated in a coordinated whole of government way with transparent reporting-back to the community.

To this end, ACTCOSS wants to see a formal mechanism for community, tenant and industry representatives to work collaboratively with the ACT Minister and Officials over the life of the Strategy on more detailed design, implementation, scrutiny of implementation and monitoring of progress of improvements in housing outcomes for people in the bottom 40 per cent of the income distribution.

**Meg Richens,
Executive Officer,
UnitingCare Kippax**

It is interesting to see the inclusion of Objective 2F: establish an integrated and coordinated human services system across the ACT Government. It is great that there is recognition of the need to provide holistic, wrap around services for people experiencing multiple complex issues. In regard to this Objective, the action plan needs further development, with both government and community partners, so that it builds effectively on the work done to date to create a more seamless and effective human services system.

**Chris Redmond,
Chief Executive Officer,
Woden Community Service**

The ACT Government listened to the community in developing the ACT Housing Strategy, particularly as it related to those in the two lower income quintiles most affected by the shortage of affordable housing.



Canberra Sunset by Trisha Grey, 2017

Their investment in increased public housing and social housing, exploring innovative models for the supply of affordable housing and the changes to provisions affecting people in the private rental market all focus on members of our community struggling most to maintain shelter.

**Edward Birt,
Chief Operating Officer,
The Disability Trust**

The Disability Trust welcomes the release of the ACT Government's Housing Strategy 2018 with its focus on improving supply and access to affordable housing in the ACT. We are particularly pleased to see the emphasis on accessible design to support people with disability and aging in place, as we know that good design up front means better outcomes for everyone as people's needs change.

We also commend attention to support the range of other housing models that people with disability may require and we are pleased to see the focus on disability through the affordable housing innovation fund, and recommend attention to building designs that ensure that social needs are met and supported at the same time as providing sufficient privacy for residents.

The Disability Trust is pleased to see attention given to alternative finance models including the shared equity options referred to in the paper. Through our mission of creating an inclusive world, we are supportive of strategies which increase home ownership by people with disability and are fully supportive of such schemes. Accessible designs are generally more expensive to design and build, and so alternative financing schemes that enable home ownership for people with disability who require Specialist Disability Accommodation builds are particularly important.

**Barnie van Wyk,
CEO of St Vincent de Paul
Society Canberra/Goulburn**

St Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn has participated in a number of consultation opportunities throughout the development of the ACT Housing Strategy including various workshops, the summit and a written submission. We are pleased that government has taken on board a number of our recommendations and those from other stakeholders, in particular the development of new and the renovation of existing public housing, that is backed by \$100 million in funding announced.

We are encouraged that the ACT Government has committed to strengthening the community housing sector, which St Vincent de Paul through its ownership of Amelie Housing is a key player; managing nearly 100 community housing properties in the ACT, and is set for growth.

We are pleased to see a range of initiatives that will assist people experiencing homelessness including early intervention, pathways out of homelessness, and addressing gaps and weaknesses in the homelessness support system. People experiencing homelessness are among the most vulnerable in our community and it is at the very core of the St Vincent de Paul mission to provide them with a hand up.

**Kate Dawson,
Executive Officer, Common
Ground Canberra Board**

Common Ground Canberra supports the objectives in the Housing Strategy to address homelessness.

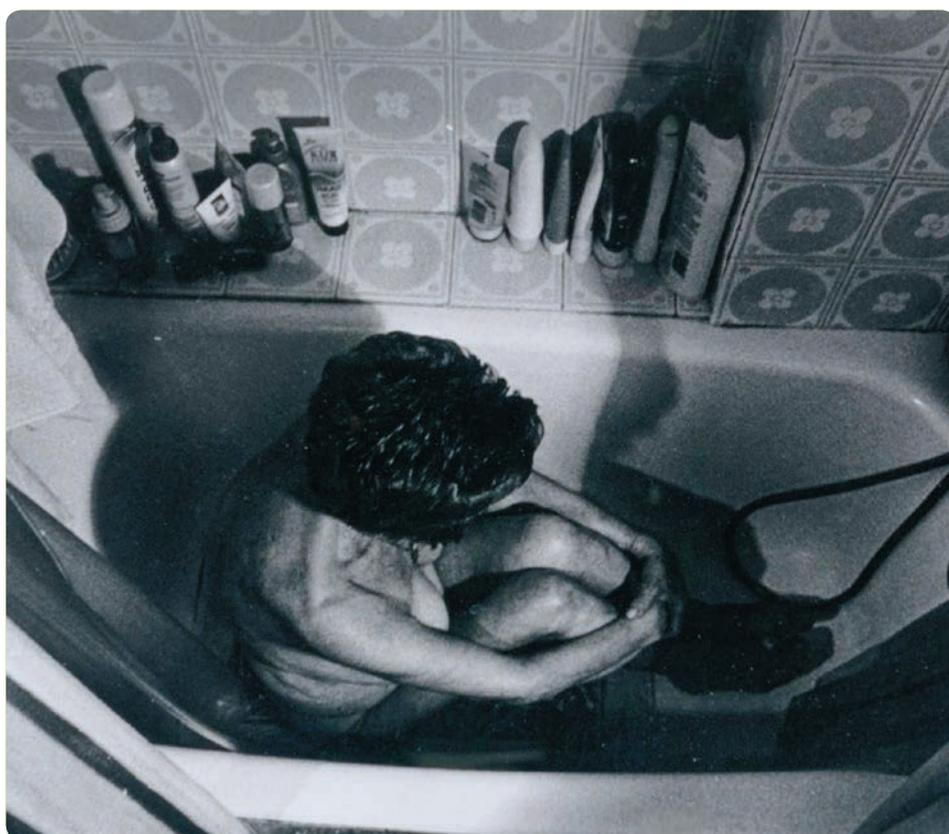
The Common Ground 'housing first' approach has been shown to be the most effective model for achieving transformational change with the chronically homeless.

We are delighted with the Government's commitment to building a second Common Ground, and acknowledge its continuing support and recognition of the Common Ground model.

We hope that the next Common Ground development in Dickson will cater to some of the emerging groups identified in the strategy. The Dickson location will provide excellent opportunities for tenants to build a secure and stable home and community life, building resilience and a new future.

Our early conversations with the Dickson community revealed strong support and a willingness by the local community to welcome and reach out to tenants.

We are looking forward to continuing to work with and support the ACT Government in reducing homelessness in the ACT.



Soledad by Silvia Herranz Gonzalez, 2017

Chapter 2:

Responding to Homelessness in the ACT

The Journey of Joint Pathways

Shannon Pickles, Senior Manager Operations, Havelock Housing

Joint Pathways, a quarterly meeting attended by delegates from all the specialist housing and homelessness services, is one of the greatest strengths of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) housing and homelessness sector. It is supported by the ACT Government through the funding of its Chair and through the provision of additional resources for sector education and training. Joint Pathways is led by an Executive Group comprised of senior representatives of its member organisations, with the Chair nominated from within that Executive.

Joint Pathways provides an avenue for systemic advocacy, examining best practice solutions, networking, training and a central point for interested parties to present research. The ACT Government has also consistently used it as the forum in which to share their latest strategic plans and shared direction for the sector, as well as discussing upcoming issues of note.

Joint Pathways has its beginnings in the somewhat chaotic nature of the sector at an earlier time. In mid-2006, there was a critical issue in the sector regarding the housing of women who were escaping domestic violence. In essence, there were five or six organisations involved in that sector that did not talk with each other, and had very closed systems in terms of announcing vacancies or taking on referrals. The Chief Executive Officer of the ACT Domestic Violence Crisis Service, (DVCS) Denise Simpson wrote a strongly worded letter to the then head of the Department of Housing and Community Services (DHCS) Sandra Lambert, identifying these issues and raising concerns that the sector was becoming highly 'siloes' with each service running completely independently of each other and the

sector. The practical consequences of this were that women escaping from domestic violence were often being forced to contact each service separately and share their story all over again each time before being placed on waiting lists and/or being accepted for referral.

The result was that Ms Lambert politely but firmly requested the presence of all Chief Executive Officers of these agencies to discuss these issues. As part of that meeting, an agreement developed to trial a collaborative housing domestic violence program over the Christmas period (an identified period of high demand on domestic violence services). This trial was extremely successful and it continues to operate to this day. More importantly, however, the trial cemented and reinforced the value of senior agency representatives meeting on a regular basis to discuss issues of this nature. The concept of the 'Pathways' network was formed.

The initial Pathways group consisted of existing domestic violence groups, expanded slightly to include all homelessness agencies supporting women, and was renamed Women's Pathways. Other Pathways groups formed quickly, targeting specific sections of the sector including Men's Pathways, Families' Pathways, and Youth Pathways all meeting on a regular basis. Many of the core members of these early groups came from existing networking groups that rebranded and/or expanded into the new pathways group concepts.

An overarching group named Joint Pathways was created to draw together core issues from the various groups for discussion. To demonstrate their support, the ACT Government contributed funding towards an

external consultant to convene and support these meetings.

The process of five separate Pathways meetings continued for another 12 to 18 months until it was identified that there were multiple networks with the same attendees discussing very similar issues. This led to the merging of many of the separate Pathways into what is now the Joint Pathways model. The one exception was the Youth Pathways network that rebranded into the Youth Housing and Homelessness Forum and was supported by the Youth Coalition of the ACT to continue operating as a separate model. A separate quarterly training forum known as the SAAP forum (SAAP was the old Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program), that provided training to front line sector workers was also folded as a result of the merging of the various networks.

Joint Pathways continued to be highly successful in terms of providing a combined sector voice across the ACT on crucial issues, and breaking down many of the barriers and walls in terms of siloed operations and services. Joint Pathways developed a process of creating sub-committees to investigate and follow up on key issues that could not be addressed within the meeting, such as training, vacancy management, minimum qualifications and so on.

An early success of the Joint Pathways process was a sub-committee that looked into vacancies and creating a streamlined process to access these vacancies. The process at the time was that anyone experiencing homelessness was required to contact every agency in the sector individually to check for

vacancies. A subcommittee was formed that travelled to Sydney to investigate the Homeless Persons Information Centre (HPIC) service. The outcome of this was the temporary creation of a 'daily vacancy list' email that was sponsored by Lifeline Canberra.

This process grew, and with the introduction of *The Road Home* 2008 White Paper on homelessness, it became a funded service — the ACT Central Intake Service.

The other major change that occurred shortly after this time was the shift from the concept of a group convener to the development of a formal Executive/Chair. Under a convener, decision making by the group was based on a consensus model. Given that by this stage almost 40 different agencies were a part of Joint Pathways, this rarely occurred. As a result, a new Terms of Reference was developed that gave power to a voted Executive Group who nominated a Chair from within its membership.

Twelve years later Joint Pathways continues to act as a strong voice and is the key representative body of homelessness organisations across the ACT. It has participated in numerous sector-wide changes and funding variations, provided feedback to focus groups and researchers, has created and managed subcommittees to investigate specific sector gaps and issues, and acts as an ideal tool for Senior Managers from agencies to network and meet.



Chanting by Hamzeh Naghdi

Bringing it all Together: Creating a Single Human Service Gateway

Julie Evans, Manager, Quality and Reporting, Woden Community Service

OneLink started operations on 1 July 2016 with the ambitious agenda to be a gateway for all human services in the ACT — covering not just housing and homelessness, or child, youth and family services, but all human services in the ACT. In the two years of operations, the service has assisted thousands of people. This article provides an overview of the development and objectives of the service, as well as the challenges faced.

Background

OneLink brought together two existing gateways — First Point, for housing and homelessness services, which had started operations in November 2010, and the Child, Youth and Family Gateway, which started in December 2012. First Point was one of the first centralised intake services in Australia for emergency accommodation, and many jurisdictions now have some form of centralized intake. However, generally gateways elsewhere in Australia are focused on housing and homelessness issues, rather than across human services.

The process for bringing all gateways together in the ACT began in 2013-14 with work on the Human Services Blueprint, a project across the ACT Government and community sector. This was a whole system reform agenda to better utilise government investment in social outcomes. A key focus of this was on creating a better service experience with services that are:

- person-centred — simple, respectful and easy to navigate
- better matched to people's actual need — right support, right time, right duration.

Creating a single Human Services Gateway was one of the three flagship initiatives under the Blueprint. This

objective for the gateway was that people would be able to address a range of issues through one pathway, with the gateway providing accessible information and self-support options, while linking individuals and families into more intensive support options when needed.

The initial stage saw increased collaboration between the existing gateways, with a service hub created at Housing ACT's Central Access Point. This highlighted that people's needs often extend across a range of service needs, and confirmed the priority for strengthening the ability to connect to a wide range of services through the access service. In 2016, the ACT Government called for proposals for a single gateway, under one provider. Woden Community Service was successful as the lead provider for the new gateway, and established the new service as OneLink.

Service Model

The vision for OneLink is that individuals and families are supported and strengthened within a respectful, integrated service system. When engaging with OneLink, people will get the help they need when they need it, because their experience with the human services system, wherever they enter it, will be positive, responsive, relevant and affirming. At the same time, all service providers engaging with OneLink will be contributing to, and benefiting from, a service system culture of mutual respect and collaboration.

Thus, there are two key aspects to the functioning of OneLink — firstly, the internal operations of the service to be able to receive and respond to enquiries and, secondly, the relationships that OneLink has with other services who refer to and/or receive referrals from OneLink.

With regard to how OneLink operates, there are four stages to the basic service model: Engage — Assess — Connect — Confirm. The objective is to be able to connect people to the service they need as quickly as possible. When a person contacts OneLink, the intake officer will gather information (from the person or referring agencies), to be able to do a comprehensive assessment, to understand the person's goals and needs, and determine the most appropriate response. This may be providing information, either in a single call or following up, or may involve OneLink connecting them to an appropriate service.

If the intake officer identifies a need to connect the individual or family to a service, then the officer will look for an appropriate service and make a referral, if the service has capacity. If the officer cannot make a referral immediately, they will look for alternative supports if needed in the short term, and stay in touch with the person until a referral can be made. For example, generally there will not be a vacancy available immediately for a person seeking emergency accommodation. The intake officer will talk to the person about their situation and options, including alternative accommodation options. In some cases, it may be that emergency accommodation is no longer necessary — for example, may refer to Supportive Tenancy Service, who will explore whether the tenancy can be saved. If the person still needs emergency accommodation, then the officer will stay in touch, usually at least weekly, while waiting for a vacancy to come up. On average, for January to July 2018, clients had to wait 21 days for emergency accommodation.

When a service notifies OneLink of a vacancy for accommodation

or support, senior OneLink officers will look at the list of clients to be considered for the vacancy, and identify who is highest priority, based on an assessment of suitability, needs and vulnerability. Once OneLink refers an individual or family to a service, the intake officer will stay in touch to confirm that the referral was successful and the person has the support they need.

Engaging with OneLink

While the previous services had been largely phone based, OneLink wanted to provide a range of options for people to connect with the service: people could drop in to see staff, who continued to be based at the Central Access Point with Housing ACT, while workers also visited a range of services around Canberra. The OneLink website offers an online chat service, and people can also email OneLink.

A key development was to appoint two workers who work part-time for OneLink and part-time for the ACT Child and Youth Protection Service (CYPS), with a focus to divert families from the statutory system and connect them with appropriate supports. A review in 2018 showed that this had been effective in increasing collaboration and in connecting families who had contact with CYPS with alternative support services. In the first 11 months of the arrangement (to March 2018), almost 100 families were actively engaged in services referred to by OneLink within one month of referral.

The 1800 phone service, which operates from 8am to 6pm, Monday to Friday, continues to be the main point of contact, but there have been many cases where people have preferred to talk to people face to face. In the first six months of 2018, 63 per cent of enquiries were by phone. On average (including all calls, not just initial enquiries), OneLink received an average of 76 calls a day in this period, and answered 85 per cent of calls (returning all messages within one business day). Most face-to-face contact was through the Housing ACT Central Access Point, with OneLink reconfiguring the approach to visiting other services during this period, temporarily reducing capacity. Most of the emails received were referrals from agencies, rather than directly from people seeking assistance.

OneLink: Enquiries (one-off assistance or initial contact for new or returning clients) — channel of enquiry — January to June 2018

Channel	Frequency	Percentage
Drop in at Housing ACT	247	7.4
Phone	2,107	63.3
Email/text/social media	749	22.5
On-line chat	24	0.7
Agency visits	11	0.3
CYPS consult	149	4.5
Other/ not recorded	247	1.3
Total	3,329	100.0

There have been calls for OneLink to be contactable on evenings and weekends, particularly for people who are seeking crisis accommodation. In the last budget, the ACT Government allocated money for a limited phone service on Friday evenings, Saturdays and Sundays, and plans are progressing for implementing this, expected by the end of 2018. A key challenge in this area is that the services providing emergency accommodation do not usually have the capacity to take in new residents, so OneLink will be able to provide information but little other assistance. The service model is still being developed and may include, for exceptional circumstances, the

capacity for OneLink to facilitate short-term motel accommodation.

OneLink is also working with a range of other community agencies in Canberra to explore options for a crisis shelter to fill this gap for immediate needs, while linking to longer-term options.

Telling Their Story Once

A key objective of all central intake services is to reduce the need for people to repeat their stories to different services. OneLink sees this in action every day, when receiving detailed referrals from agencies, and being able to pass on comprehensive information when making referrals to other services. However, there are also limits to this, with many services still completing their own assessments and requiring people to provide additional documentation and information. OneLink is engaging with Housing ACT and other partners at present to review the assessment requirements and is seeking to streamline processes so that people do not need to repeat their story when they are most vulnerable.

Connections Made

In terms of bringing together a holistic focus on a range of issues, the experience of OneLink is that requests for assistance were heavily dominated around crisis accommodation, both in terms of numbers and urgency. This has proved a challenge for the service, to ensure that all people approaching OneLink can feel that their needs are heard and circumstances are valued.

The table below shows that, of the 1,540 clients in the first six months of 2018, OneLink identified a need to be connected to a service for

OneLink: Number of clients with needs for connection to service; type of support services needed, Jan to Jun 2018

Clients		
Need	Number	Percent
Accommodation	644	42
Support	723	47
Any need	1,112	72
All clients	1,540	100
<i>Note: excludes one-off assistance. Some clients had both accommodation and support needs, or multiple support needs; some clients did not need to be connected to any services.</i>		

Support needs		
Type of support	Count	Percent
Housing-related #	570	70
Family/youth	135	17
Other support	107	13
Total support needs	812	13
<i># Housing support includes assertive outreach for people who are homeless, assistance to access independent housing and tenancy support.</i>		



Dignity by Hamzeh Naghdi

72 per cent. More clients needed connection to support (47 per cent) then accommodation (short-term or transitional) for 42 per cent, with 17 per cent needing connection to both accommodation and support. Housing-related support was the most common support need identified (70 per cent).

Regardless of the challenges, there have also been clear benefits of the broad scope of services that OneLink engages with. As noted above, OneLink has built a strong relationship with Child and Youth Protection Services, and this has enabled families to be diverted from the statutory system.

OneLink has also gradually been taking on an extended role in convening case conferences to bring together a range of services to assist individuals or families with complex needs who may be connecting with many different areas in the service system. OneLink's central role and relationships with a wide range of services has meant that it is well-positioned to identify possibilities and bring together services to provide an integrated response that is beyond individual services.

Conclusion

The first two years of operation for OneLink have shown the potential for an integrated human service gateway

to achieve the vision for individuals and families to be supported and strengthened within a respectful, integrated service system. The service model and relationships continue to evolve and develop to be able to deliver on this vision. OneLink thanks all the services around Canberra who have worked with us to be able to help the many thousands of people who have contacted us, shared their stories, and looked for support to make a better future.

Onelink is run by Woden Community Service and funded by the ACT and Australian governments under the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement.

An Action Plan to Prevent Child Homelessness: A service model for children aged eight to 15 in the ACT

Erin Barry, Director, Policy, Youth Coalition of the ACT

If a child under the age of 16 is homeless in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) they are highly vulnerable and at risk of harm, because there are currently no accommodation services in the ACT for these children who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

For close to 20 years, the ACT child, youth and homelessness sectors have called for critical action to address the gap in accommodation services for children under the age of 16. This age cohort was identified in the 2004 'Breaking the cycle: ACT Homelessness Strategy'¹ as increasing and with complex needs, requiring 'a range of accommodation and support services to prevent a cycle of homelessness and poverty'. This critical need has never been adequately addressed in the ACT, while other states have led the way in developing supportive accommodation for children at risk of homelessness.

The government and community services share a commitment to intervening early to prevent harm and ensure all children have access to a safe living environment. It is time to put this critically important commitment into action to protect children aged eight to 15 who are at risk of significant harm, and subsequent homelessness.

The Youth Coalition of the ACT, Families ACT, ACT Council of Social Services and ACT Shelter present this Action Plan proposing a service model that extends across the spectrum of support from early intervention to tertiary prevention. The local and national research that forms the evidence base for this Action Plan has consistently shown that we need to intervene early to

support children and families, while also responding to the unmet needs of children who cannot remain at home. It draws crucial attention to the specific needs of children aged eight to 15 who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness, as well as effective service responses that are operating successfully in other Australian jurisdictions.

Collectively, through this Action Plan, we call upon the ACT Government to endorse and allocate additional funding to implement this service model, supported by strong policy, in partnership with the community sector.

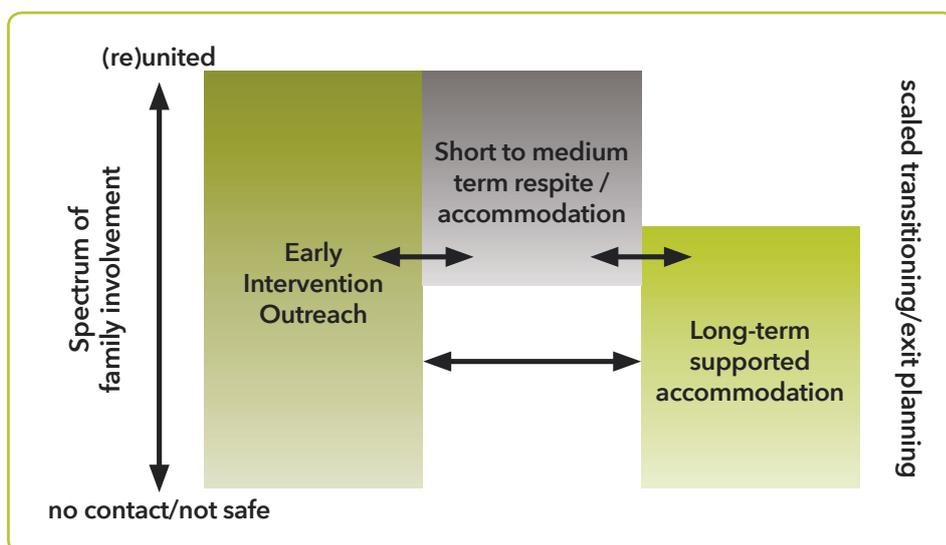
A Service Model for Children Aged eight to 15

This proposed service model responds to the gap in appropriate services and supports, including accommodation, for children aged eight to 15 who are experiencing or at risk of significant harm and/or homelessness. Critically, while addressing the shortfall in accommodation services for children under the age of 16, it also responds to the primary risk factor leading

to child and youth homelessness: family conflict and breakdown. In addition to homelessness, family conflict and breakdown can lead to a range of other negative outcomes, such as disengagement from education, including school suspension, and possible involvement with statutory child protection and the criminal justice system.

The critical need for services to respond to the existing relationships that children have with their families, across the spectrum of family involvement, is at the core of this service model. Its central aim is to strengthen family functioning, including parenting capacity and parent-child relationships. This aims to support children to remain with their family, while also providing safe temporary and long-term accommodation options where necessary. The model promotes the following outcomes:

- early intervention to prevent youth homelessness
- reducing family conflict and breakdown to improve the well-being of children and young people



- changing life trajectories away from statutory services, including child protection and the criminal justice system
- reducing education disengagement, including in transitions from primary to high school, and to reduce school suspensions
- building the capacity of the youth and family sector to engage in family-focused youth work

While local and national research in this area mainly focuses on young people aged 12 to 15, this service model recognises the importance of also responding to the needs of children in the 'middle years' (eight to 12 years). Children in this age group experience unique challenges and transitions, and these middle years represent a critical opportunity to prevent negative outcomes during adolescence, including youth homelessness.

Three Service Components

The service model encompasses three distinct service components. These components may be delivered by

multiple programs or organisations, but robust collaboration and referral pathways are critical to support a cohesive and coordinated response across the service model, ensuring continuity of care. Each of the three components requires expertise in a range of therapeutic interventions and supports, alongside the provision of case management and casework to address other factors affecting families. Specific services and culturally appropriate practices to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and families are also required. Pathways into services may include self-referrals, schools/education providers, Child and Youth Protection Services (CYPS), Onelink, and youth and community services; as well as between each component within the service model.

1. Early intervention outreach

The early intervention outreach component aims to improve the wellbeing of children aged 8 to 15 and their families by addressing the risk factors that increase family stress, through case management, family mediation and support.

This service responds to early signs of family conflict, school disengagement, and anti-social behaviours such as problematic alcohol and other drug use and criminal activity, signs that indicate the increased likelihood of family conflict and breakdown. The service would work across the spectrum of family contact and involvement.

Service example: *The Youth Hope Program in NSW is an early intervention program, supporting children and young people aged nine to 15 and their families, where a child or young person has been identified as at risk of significant harm. Through a therapeutic, wraparound service which may include home visits, counselling, parenting support and referrals to other health and community service providers, the program aims to support families to stay together, improve family functioning and child wellbeing and to prevent escalation into statutory child protection.*

NATIONAL YOUTH HOMELESSNESS CONFERENCE

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According to the official ABS statistics, of the 116,000 Australians, who are homeless on any given night, about one in four (24%) are children and young people between the ages of 12-24 years, and this is acknowledged as an underestimate. In Australia, youth homelessness has had a higher public profile than other countries, **but time and time again the promises made to young people have been under-delivered.**

What has been done in the decade since the National Youth Commission into Youth Homelessness and the Australian Government's White Paper, *The Road Home*?

What can we do, beyond the usual 'tinkering around the edges' and providing more crisis responses? What would a genuine strategy to end youth homelessness actually look like?

THIS IS THE FIRST NATIONAL CONFERENCE FOCUSING ON YOUTH HOMELESSNESS IN NEARLY 20 YEARS - LET'S COME TOGETHER TO LEARN FROM THE PAST, PLAN FOR THE FUTURE AND ACT TO REDUCE YOUTH HOMELESSNESS!

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The National Youth Homelessness Conference is auspiced by Youth Development Australia.

2. Short to medium-term respite/accommodation

The short to medium-term respite/accommodation component would provide temporary accommodation to children, while supporting them to rebuild their relationships with their family through mediation and counselling of both child and family members. This provides a flexible, safe, home-like environment and a reliable alternative for children when they are unable or unwilling to stay at home. Families are actively engaged through mediation, counselling, and other supports, with the response adapting to changing family circumstances over time. Success may include children being supported to progressively transition back into the family home, or supporting improved relationships and support as they transition into alternative accommodation.

Service example: *Ruby's Reunification Program in South Australia provides support and accommodation to young people aged 12 to 17 who plan to return home or would like to find other accommodation. This program has been successful in engaging with families to help resolve conflict and improve relationships through family counselling. Young people involved in the program have the option to spend some nights at home, and some nights in Ruby's accommodation services, providing 'respite' away from home. Young people can still access 24-hour support from the program while at home.*

3. Long-term supported accommodation in a home-like environment

This component would provide a safe, stable, home-like environment for children and young people who cannot remain in the family home. This service provides long-term accommodation until a viable option is identified and a co-created exit plan is established, which crucially does not exit young people into homelessness (or homelessness services). This long-term support aims to prevent young people from becoming embedded into street/homelessness lifestyles or cultures, and the associated trajectory into

chronic homelessness, statutory child protection, the justice system, or adverse health outcomes. Children would have access to the service prior to turning 16, and could remain supported within this long-term accommodation until early adulthood, and then continue to receive support after transitioning to independence.

Service example: *The Lighthouse Foundation in Victoria provides home-like accommodation to young people aged 15 to 22 who cannot remain with their family. This therapeutic and trauma-informed service accommodates up to four young people and two carers in each house, supported by psychologists and health professionals. When young people move into independent living, they have continued access to aftercare and outreach programs. An independent assessment found that eight out of ten young people who complete the program permanently exit out of homelessness, creating \$12 in social value for every dollar invested.*

Strong Policy

The development and implementation of the proposed service model must be underpinned

by strong policy. A targeted ACT policy commitment and response to supporting children aged eight to 15 and their families needs to:

Establish responsibility for developing and implementing the service model across key ACT Government Directorates, including the Community Services Directorate (ACT Housing and CYPS), the Education Directorate, Health Policy Directorate and Justice and Community Safety Directorate, in partnership with the specialist homelessness sector and child, youth and family sector.

- Articulate a clear and cohesive governance framework to provide oversight for the service model, to support effective collaboration, coordination and evaluation.
- Build upon and contribute to the emerging Australian evidence base for how best to support children and young people aged nine to 15 who are at risk of significant harm and/or homelessness, across the spectrum of need.
- Align and embed the policy response into current and developing policy initiatives, such as Early Support by Design and the implementation of the ACT Housing Strategy.

Endnote

1. <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/3099942>



Buildings (detail) by GildaRedondo

Preventing Homelessness: The Role of Tenancy Support

Julie Evans, Manager, Quality and Reporting, Woden Community Service

The Supportive Tenancy Service (STS) works across the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) to assist people who have a tenancy at risk, seeking to sustain that tenancy and so prevent people becoming homeless. STS also provides a Housing Options service, assisting people who are facing barriers in establishing a tenancy in private rental or community housing. This article will look at the types of issues that can place a tenancy at risk and, drawing on case studies, show how STS works to prevent homelessness.

STS commenced operations in November 2010, building on previous services in Canberra including the Sustaining Tenancy Program for public housing tenants. This was part of a range of initiatives that were funded through the ACT Government in partnership with the Australian Government following

the White Paper, *The Road Home*¹ which placed importance on 'turning off the tap' and early intervention services so that people did not become homeless in the first place.

STS works with people through a range of different tenancy types and matters. In January to June 2018, 43.9 per cent of clients were in a private rental property when coming to STS, while 21.6 per cent were in public housing. The remaining clients were in other forms of rental, such as community housing, or did not have a tenancy.

For tenancy support, the STS workers talk to clients about their situation and options and agree on a plan. The workers can make referrals for specialist legal or financial advice, link the client to other services such as mental health support, advocate with property managers and other parties, and support the client through the steps required to sustain the tenancy. With housing options, the worker assists clients to explore their options and provides advice on how to secure a community housing or private rental tenancy. Neither service has allocated funding to help sustain or obtain a tenancy.

One of the most common issues that STS assist with is property condition, particularly where there are large amounts of clutter. The role of STS is not to provide hands-on support but to look at how to assist regarding the tenancy issues and connecting to support needed. In the past, Home and Community Care services often assisted clients, but the transition to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and My Aged Care has changed this. STS workers are often drawn into issues around access to NDIS and, even when a person

has an NDIS package, the plan may not cover the needs in this area.

The focus for STS becomes how to address immediate issues, while also looking for longer-term assistance.

Case Studies

Toby was struggling in his shared apartment. He had a lot of personal belongings that were filling the living areas. This didn't only cause conflict with his fellow tenants, but also the landlord, who was concerned about the fire risk and had threatened eviction. The STS tenancy support worker supported Toby to gain confidence to start to sort through his belongings and reduce the clutter. The worker also helped him set up systems to prevent this reoccurring and assisted Toby in liaising with the landlord. Toby was living with a mental illness, and had received some services in the past but had not yet tried to apply for the NDIS. The worker talked to him about a service in the ACT that may assist him in the medium term and help with applying for NDIS.*

Financial difficulties also often place tenancies at risk, and STS intervenes to be able to assist the tenant address tenancy issues and connect in with specialist services.

Simon was in a public housing property and had a substantial debt. This had arisen both through a time when he was unwell, eventually leaving work, and because there were family members present who were earning but not contributing to the rental payments. When he first made contact with STS, he was facing a tribunal hearing the following month regarding his arrears. The STS tenancy support worker met with Simon, then contacted a community*



legal centre, who agreed to assist at the tribunal hearing. The STS worker also arranged a meeting with a financial counselling service, who prepared a budget that would enable Simon to meet his payments. The tribunal made an order for repayment of arrears. Problems in meeting the order later arose when Simon experienced mental ill health, and the STS tenancy support worker again assisted the family, liaising with the housing manager, as well as legal and financial services, to ensure that arrangements were put in place that saw the tenancy sustained.

The STS housing options officer can help people access community housing or private rental properties, for those who have the income and capacity to sustain such a tenancy. Securing a tenancy can be a confusing and frustrating process, particularly for those who have limited experience or are facing barriers to securing a home.

Lucy's family had to leave their current home and had put in applications for over 50 properties without success, with increasing stress as the deadline neared. Their income was variable and they had some debts, but they had shown they could meet regular payments.*

The STS housing options worker talked with them about the processes in applying for rentals and suggested that the family prepare a rental resume to attach to applications. They agreed to this and then reported that were successful in securing a tenancy in the next week.

There remain many challenges in this space, particularly given the high cost of rental properties in Canberra, and the changes in the service system. Even though STS cannot address all issues and save every tenancy, such early intervention services are crucial in preventing

homelessness. In all three examples outlined here, the tenants were at risk, and may have been left without a home without STS assistance.

* Names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

STS is provided as a partnership between Woden Community Service, Belconnen Community Service and YWCA Canberra, funded by the ACT Government and Australian Government under the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement.

Endnote

1. Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2008, *The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness (The White Paper on Homelessness)*, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Canberra, accessed 13 September 2018, <http://www.abc.net.au/cm/lb/4895838/data/the-road-home---a-national-approach-to-reducing-homelessness-data.pdf>



Unless by Andrea Fabe-Heywood

Addressing ACT Youth Homelessness Through Health Justice

Farzana Choudhury, Street Law Program Manager and Solicitor, Canberra Community Law

Several community legal centres and legal aid commissions throughout Australia have been establishing health justice partnerships (HJPs), in an effort to improve access to legal support in health settings.¹ HJPs are collaborations that seek to bring lawyers into healthcare settings to address legal need that can have an impact on health outcomes.² Acknowledging continued concerns around youth homelessness rates in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), Street Law, a free legal service for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness in the ACT, recently established a health justice partnership with the Junction Youth Health Service (Junction), a bulk billing health service for young people who are experiencing homelessness or otherwise at risk.

This paper highlights the need to address youth homelessness in the ACT through holistic, collaborative models, such as HJPs. It will provide an overview of why youth homelessness is a problem of specific concern, and highlight the types of legal issues faced by young people experiencing disadvantage. It will then outline how Street Law and the Junction have been seeking to address the unmet, health-affecting legal needs of young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness through an HJP.

Youth Homelessness in the ACT and its Impacts

Young people are overrepresented in Australia's homeless population.³ The proportion of young people aged 12 to 24 years old experiencing homelessness is consistent across all States and Territories, ranging from 21 per cent to 26 per cent.⁴ The 2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census data indicated that increasing numbers of younger persons are experiencing homelessness.⁵

It is further estimated that in 2016, young people aged between 12 to 24 years old experiencing homelessness made up 32 per cent of the total homeless population living in severely crowded dwellings; 23 per cent of persons in supported accommodation experiencing homelessness, and 16 per cent of people staying temporarily in other households.⁶ Mission Australia's recent *Young People's Experiences of Homelessness* report (YPEH report) indicated that 27,683 young Australians aged 12 to 24 years have experienced homelessness — almost one quarter of Australia's homelessness population.⁷

Regarding ACT youth homelessness rates, the YPEH report also indicated that 16.6 per cent of ACT young people who had responded to Mission Australia's 2017 Youth Survey had experienced homelessness, slightly higher than the national rate (15.6 per cent).⁸ Further, there are particular concerns around a lack of accommodation options for ACT young people aged 12 to 15 who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness.⁹

Among other risks, young people experiencing homelessness are at a high risk of developing poor health outcomes,¹⁰ and are also more likely to have difficulties exiting homelessness as adults.¹¹ They are also more likely to experience homelessness later on in life.¹² Accordingly, it is crucial that active steps be taken to address the issue.

Young People and Dealing with Legal Issues

Legal problems faced by young people have a direct impact on their lives, including in relation to health, relationship breakdown and financial strain.¹³ Young people who

have experienced homelessness are particularly susceptible to experiencing legal problems.¹⁴ Legal issues frequently faced by young people include criminal charges, police issues and housing issues.¹⁵ Such findings have been attributed to lower financial independence and housing standards, as well as higher crime and victimisation rates. (16) Young people accessing Street Law's services experience a broad range of legal issues, including but not limited to public housing eligibility, Centrelink issues, consumer law issues, debt, traffic fines, police complaints and minor criminal matters. The most common causes for youth homelessness in Australia are domestic/family violence and insecure housing,¹⁷ problems which give rise to legal issues and health consequences.

While many young people experiencing homelessness will be faced with legal issues, they will not necessarily approach a lawyer. The landmark 2012 Legal Australia-Wide Survey found that younger people were less likely to take action in response to legal problems,¹⁸ and when they do they have been found to be significantly less likely to get advice before taking action in most jurisdictions.¹⁹

Such findings indicate a need for more accessible legal services, to ensure that young people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness are appropriately supported in dealing with legal problems.

Improving Access Through HJPs

Street Law has sought to address the unmet legal needs of young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness through its new HJP with the Junction. Many people will not seek advice when dealing

with legal problems, and when they do, they are more likely to ask someone who is not a lawyer, such as a health professional. (20) However, through the Street Law/Junction HJP, a lawyer is now an accessible, immediate referral option for Junction staff. As part of this HJP, a lawyer is based at the Junction once a week, to provide legal support to patients identified by health and youth work staff as having legal issues. The HJP recognises the key role that social workers have in enriching partnerships,²¹ with youth workers supporting patients to meet with a lawyer once a legal issue has been identified as important. The availability of Junction youth workers to facilitate legal referrals has been critical to bridging the gap between health and legal staff.

Acknowledging that professionals working with clients experiencing disadvantage may not realise that an issue may have a legal solution,²² Street Law has provided training to Junction staff on identifying legal problems. Given that disclosure of legal problems early on is more likely to be to a health or welfare worker, equipping these practitioners with the capacity to identify when a patient has a legal issue and what referrals to make is critical to ensuring that legal issues are addressed as early as possible. Further training on legal issues that health workers may be asked to assist with, such as writing support letters for public housing applications and court matters will also be provided.

As an outreach legal service, Street Law visits places where people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness are already accessing services, such as community centres, food pantries and refuges. This model is supported by Curran, who notes that legal professionals should be going to places where people experiencing disadvantage are accessing services, rather than waiting for a client to make an appointment with a lawyer.²³ The Street Law/Junction HJP provides a particularly targeted and holistic approach to providing legal assistance. While similar to Street Law's existing outreaches, the HJP seeks to

provide an even more accessible and integrated service, with a lawyer being just like any other Junction staff member available to provide support to patients.

While the Street Law/Junction HJP commenced recently, many of the clients that we have seen at the Junction would not have engaged with a lawyer had it not been for health and youth work staff connecting patients to us. Continuing to provide legal assistance in a healthcare setting will hopefully result in ACT young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness being better equipped to address legal issues and prevent such issues from having adverse health impacts.

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Safe Shelter ACT: A Community Response to Homelessness

Richard Griffiths, Safe Shelter Coordinating Committee*

What ain't we got? ...

The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) has got meals and it's got op shops, it's got supported accommodation (via referrals, of course!), it's got counsellors and rehab, it's got case managers and bureaucrats and a lot of meetings and conferences. What it didn't have is somewhere safe for men to seek shelter if they found themselves homeless *that night!*

Safe Shelter ACT is a cluster of three near-by [Why?] church halls in inner Canberra that accept homeless men (*What about women?*) to walk-in and sleep overnight on the floor (*Isn't that uncomfortable? Isn't it dangerous? What do they sleep on? Don't the neighbours complain about having homeless men in their neighbourhoods?*), at no charge (How do you get them to the next steps out of homelessness?) in winter.

Each night the shelters are run by two to three volunteers. (*What would volunteers know? How are they trained? How do they deal with the different halls? How do they deal with emergencies or threats?*) The volunteers provide hot drinks and biscuits only. (*What about meals?*)

Unless you know the answers to the questions above, read on.

Introduction

Safe Shelter ACT began in 2010-11 when the ACT community became increasingly concerned about homeless men sleeping on the streets in Canberra's winters, with temperatures at night falling to minus six to minus eight degrees Celsius and nowhere for the sleeping rough homeless, mainly men, to go. This article explains what has evolved and why, so that other communities can do something similar.

As many readers will be aware, 'Housing First' is the current flavour de jour, so why have a shelter project? It's simple: getting anyone into permanent housing takes time; the longer the homeless are on the streets the more entrenched their problems become and thus the more it costs to provide their rehabilitation, health and social services. The first step therefore seems self-evident: *provide somewhere safe and sheltered for them to sleep until the rest of the welfare support systems can start to take effect.*

In the beginning

It was hoped to convert vacant office blocks into shelters staffed by volunteers. The Building Code of Australia and the property owners did not support that. Insurance for volunteers, as well as for the buildings, would be complex and expensive, and the buildings' use as shelters might be very temporary.

It was realised that many churches have halls which are not normally used at night. Churches, unlike more general community buildings in the ACT, are structured to support community welfare projects, because that's what churches do. Further, as a project of that church, there should be no charge for the use of the hall as a shelter.

Then there was the legal protection of the volunteers. Churches already have insurance for volunteers working on their projects. If shelters operated as an approved project of each church, and had undergone insurance risk assessment, then that shelter, and the volunteers who run it, could be covered by that church's insurance. Each project/shelter would need to operate with the same guidelines, to allow

volunteers to staff different shelters on different nights, so a coordinating committee structure, involving all participating churches, was required.

First the buildings had to meet Building Code requirements or else the insurance policies would be void and the volunteers exposed. In addition to requiring approved hardwired fire detection, emergency lighting and alarm systems to allow people to sleep overnight (a Class 3 Building), which no one could argue against, the Code also requires the provision of suitable ablutions facilities, that is, showers.

Most church halls do not have showers and showers can cost thousands of dollars to retrofit and then maintain, to say nothing of the complexities of providing towels and cleaning.

Canberra is very short of public showers, but the Uniting Church in central Canberra, had a shower for use by the homeless coming to its Early Morning Centre for breakfast, etc. That meant that as long as the homeless shelter(s) were within walking distance, the Early Morning Centre's solitary shower would suffice as a suitable alternative.

That still left financial challenges to set up shelters.

First, the halls had to be up-to-date as Class 9a buildings, that is, community halls. While all church halls had been certified as Class 9a when built, the Building Code requirements had increased over time — door locks, exit lighting, etc — and now, to be certified as Class 3 Buildings, the halls had to meet current Class 9a standards. It was accepted that cost should be met by the church concerned, possibly with the aid of grants.

Do you have somewhere **safe** to sleep tonight?

SAFE SHELTER is a community hall open to homeless men.

When and where?

Sunday	All Saints Anglican Church 7pm till 7am
Monday	All Saints Anglican Church 7pm till 7am
Tuesday	St Columba's Uniting Church 7pm till 7am
Wednesday	St Columba's Uniting Church 7pm till 7am
Thursday	St Columba's Uniting Church 7pm till 7am
Friday	Salvation Army 7pm till 7am
Saturday	Salvation Army 7pm till 7am

22 April–29 September

- Bring your swag or get one on the night
- No need to book – Just arrive before 10pm

Shelter Policy:

- NO Alcohol** • **NO Drugs** • **NO Violence** • **Lights out and doors locked at 10pm**
- Please be sober and respectful of the hall as a SAFE place to sleep out of the cold

Want to volunteer? email: safeshelteract@gmail.com
Proudly supported by 2B.com.au



and lessons were learned so, from 2014–2016, St Columba's provided their hall from Tuesday to Thursday evenings; the same happened but the guest usage grew from 15 on the 23 weeks in 2013 to 139 in 2016.

Enter All Saints Anglican Church in Ainslie and the Salvation Army Canberra City Corps in Braddon. Their halls were provided in 2017 on a 'pilot' project basis, on Monday and Friday nights respectively, with the same results and a total of 381 'guest nights', so both expanded to two nights each week in 2018, giving seven nights per week coverage, opening from late April to late September for a total of 743 guest nights.

Organisational Structure

The structure is simple:

- A Safe Shelter Coordinating Committee, including representatives of each participating church, Rotary, and local welfare organisations (to provide technical welfare advice):
- maintains the standardised Guidelines for Volunteers
- organises the recruitment and induction (that is, training) of volunteers
- manages the volunteers' roster so that participating halls are appropriately staffed to meet insurance requirements
- ensures that each church has sufficient funds to meet its project's requirements
- provides the bedding/swags/mats and limited clothing, typically warm jackets
- handles public relations.

In addition to being represented on the Safe Shelter Coordinating Committee, each participating church's Safe Shelter Management Committee is responsible to its church or parish council for:

- booking its hall as a shelter for nights as agreed at the Safe Shelter Coordinating Committee, that is, the same two or three nights each week for the duration of the winter
- providing communication between the Safe Shelter Coordinating Committee and the church or parish council, for example, getting any proposed changes to the Guidelines for Volunteers agreed by that church

That left the upgrading of each Class 9a hall to a Class 3, that is, fire detection, emergency lights and alarms. Class 3 certification would not normally be required by churches so those costs, nowadays over \$10,000/hall, were a project cost. The first system, at St Columba's Uniting Church, in Braddon, in 2012, was almost magically funded by non-tax-deductible donations to get work underway, but it was realised that the Rotary Club of Canberra, already supporting the project, could accept public tax-deductible donations via its J C Olsson Relief Trust Fund as this was one of its club projects.

If the J C Olsson Relief Trust Fund paid monies directly to the participating churches, when requested by the Safe

Shelter Coordinating Committee, then a full audit trail would be established but there was no need for Safe Shelter to have its own accounts!

Now that the halls are set up it takes very little money to run Safe Shelter and anyway the public is very generous. In addition to individuals' donations, many groups run events for which Safe Shelter is the focus (sometimes without even telling us!).

Now we are three

In the beginning, there was one shelter, at St Columba's Uniting Church, in Braddon. They very courageously donated the use of their hall for one night each week in the winter of 2013. Nothing went terribly wrong, the joint didn't get trashed

- maintaining its hall — heating, cleaning, etc
- providing hot drink facilities, biscuits, etc, to be served by the volunteers
- keeping its church community informed.

The volunteers come from all walks of life, are male or female, over 18, and:

- undertake a two-evening induction course explaining: the ACT's homeless situation; the volunteers' role, ie running a safe place to sleep; the facilities of the halls; opening, lights out and morning procedures; welcoming guests [Yes, that's what we call the homeless men and it works a treat!]; and handling emergencies
- only then are volunteers allowed to sign an agreement that they will: work one night each month for that winter; treat guests and their fellow volunteers with respect; and always comply with the *Guidelines for Volunteers*
- then, when they roster themselves to work in a shelter on a particular night, they work as a volunteer on that church's project.



People, Place, Pets by Tess Rey Cook, 2017

Safe Shelter then:

- maintains a copy of each volunteer's: agreement form, personal contact details and Working With Vulnerable People card
- provides each volunteer with Read-Only access to the roster and explains how they can nominate to the Roster Coordinator which nights they wish to be on duty
- provides all volunteers with: the current *Guidelines for Volunteers*; contact details of all volunteers; and an e-mailed Weekly Report covering: the roster for the next two weeks, the guests and events of the previous week, and any lessons learned or possible policy changes.
- So, in answer to the questions at the beginning of this article:

Why are the church halls nearby?

So that the shelters are in walking distance for guests, both coming in the evening and going, in the morning, to the showers (and breakfast) at the Early Morning Centre.

What about women? Women's needs may be more complex, particularly if domestic violence is

involved and, back in 2011, there weren't very many women sleeping rough. It's a job for the future.

Isn't it uncomfortable to sleep on the floor? Only for volunteers; it's much safer and warmer for guests than sleeping on the streets!

Isn't it dangerous? Safe Shelter guests come to sleep. If they misbehave they would be made to leave. Thus far, after over 1,400 'guest-nights', volunteers have never had to ask a guest to leave.

What do they sleep on?
Re-usable swags laid on mats.

Don't the neighbours complain about having homeless men in their neighbourhoods? No. First, neighbours would rather guests be in a shelter than on their streets. Second, by having the shelters in different locations on different nights, and by having the guests go off-site for breakfast, they have less reason to stick around.

How do you get guests to the next steps out of homelessness?
Ah, there's another problem.

There are insufficient 'exit points' in the ACT 'system' — we're starting to work on that!

What would volunteers know? How are they trained? How do they deal with emergencies or threats? See Induction Course above and our *Guidelines for Volunteers*.

How do volunteers deal with the differences between halls?
They use standard *Guidelines for Volunteers*, with minor modifications in local checklists.

What about meals? The Red Cross Roadhouse, at the Griffin Centre in Civic, provides dinners, and the Early Morning Centre provides breakfast, showers and connections with welfare agencies.

And, just to repeat: *first Safe Shelter gets men off the streets and into shelter so their homelessness doesn't become entrenched*; then real welfare services can help them.

*Richard Griffiths, Safe Shelter Coordinator; Ph: 0412 164 404, Email: safeshelteract@gmail.com

Common Ground ACT

Kate Dawson, Executive Officer, Common Ground Canberra Board

The Common Ground model developed by MacArthur and Ashoka Fellow Rosanne Haggerty in 1990 was a pioneer in the 'Housing First' supportive housing and other research-based practices aimed at ending homelessness. The 'Housing First' model holds to the fundamental principle that secure, permanent independent housing is made available first, and is then accompanied by assertive and appropriate support services that will sustain people in that housing to enable them restore their health and economic independence and reconnect with the community.

Common Ground aims to house the most vulnerable: those who have been homeless the longest, have the most disabling conditions, and are least likely to access other housing options. These individuals typically spend years cycling between emergency shelters, hospitals, and jails. The Common Ground approach also seeks to strengthen communities and prevent homelessness by recognising and addressing the multiple factors that cause individuals and families to become homeless.

The Common Ground model is unique in providing permanent, affordable, safe, high quality supportive housing. There is support for tenants on site, a deliberately diverse mix of tenants — 50 per cent formerly homeless, 50 per cent low income — community spaces, and a concierge.

The first Common Ground model in Australia was built in Adelaide in 2006, followed in subsequent years by Brisbane, Sydney, Hobart and Melbourne. At first glance, the Common Ground approach appears to be more expensive than other models, in part due to the inclusion

of concierge services. However, the research evidence clearly shows this is not true over the long-term and when the full economic cost of homelessness to society is included.

In their research into the impact of the Brisbane Common Ground Dr Cameron Parsell¹ and others found a cost saving of \$13,500 per annum per tenant once the costs of services such as ambulance, hospitalisation services and police involved before an individual moved into Common Ground housing.

The Common Ground model was introduced to Canberra by the extraordinary efforts of Liz Dawson while she was a welfare worker for the Salvation Army. One SummerNats weekend, as a last resort, Liz approached the elders at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy to host a vulnerable young family seeking help. Liz was humbled by the generous response from the elders at the Tent Embassy. However, she was also embarrassed that a wealthy city like Canberra had nothing else to offer.

After extensive research, Liz discovered the Common Ground model and decided that this was what Canberra needed. She established Common Ground Canberra to build support for the initiative and prepare a business case for the development of a Common Ground in Canberra. This included representatives from the community, business, government and philanthropic sectors.

The Snow Foundation provided early support pledging \$500,000 if it was matched by the ACT Government to support the concierge service. After extensive lobbying funding was received from both the Federal and ACT Governments and the development commenced.

In July 2015, Canberra's first Common Ground located in Gungahlin opened. The building has 40 one-bedroom units, half are occupied by social housing tenants and the other half by affordable housing tenants. The ground floor comprises office space, a large common room including a kitchen, art room, computer kiosk and library. Tenants use the common areas for shared dinners, movie nights and to socialise with one another. With the permission of tenants, common areas are also used for community activities. For example, the Country Womens Association hold monthly meetings and the common areas are used for the Gungahlin Impressions Art Group and Cooking Circles which are both open to tenants.

Support services for Common Ground tenancies are provided by Argyle Housing and Northside Community Services. Argyle Housing provide tenancy management services while Northside Community Services provides individual support to tenants and community development. This approach to split responsibilities between two providers means that tenants with problems meeting their rental payments tenants can seek support from someone other than their landlord. Where tenants experience challenges in meeting rent and other tenancy obligations, both organisations work together to support tenants to maintain their tenancies.

Being located onsite means that the Northside Community Services and Argyle Housing teams are able to build trusting and supportive relationships with tenants through casual encounters such as running into each other in the lift. It also

means tenants are able to seek support when they need it. Often these opportunities are used to remind tenants about tenancy related matters. Both social and affordable tenants are able to ask for support from the Northside Community Services team.

The Canberra community has been involved in Common Ground Canberra since its inception. The building was furnished from generous donations by the business community including IKEA and Domayne. The Canberra Quilters made beautiful quilts for the all the social tenants. Each of the units for social tenants was fully furnished with IKEA furniture. The furniture was assembled over a number of weekends by volunteers from all parts of the community. Gungahlin Uniting Church provided welcome packs for all tenants and volunteers helped plant the community garden at Common Ground.

As the Gungahlin Community has grown, so have the opportunities to build stronger connections between Common Ground tenants and the community. The Gungahlin Impressions Art group, an initiative of a tenant, meets at Common Ground Canberra and comprises artists from the Gungahlin community including tenants. This prolific group is led by two community artists who are paid from a donation to Common Ground Canberra. As well as providing participants the opportunity to create art together, members are making new friends. The group held a successful one-day exhibition last year where artists sold their work. One member earned enough money to register her car for three months and buy Christmas presents for her grandchildren. A cooking circle is also run out of Common Ground and provides members of the community an opportunity to cook together.

Common Ground Canberra has had a significant impact on the lives of tenants. The two-year snapshot of social tenants conducted by Northside Community Services² showed that 65 per cent of tenants had changed their employment arrangements, 35 per cent were engaging in education, 90 per cent had engaged with Northside Community Services to develop plans for the future.



Loneliness by Qisthi Shafira

Most importantly the vast majority of tenants felt that this is now their home and they feel safe.

In September 2018, IKEA hosted a dinner to celebrate how far our tenants had come. It was a joyful evening with some magnificent food provided by IKEA. Tenants shared how Common Ground had provided a place to call home, security and community. For one tenant, having a place to call home allowed her to focus on supporting her terminally ill partner. Other tenants have been able to establish and achieve goals through the support provided. The sense of community was palpable with tenants talking about how they had made friends at Common Ground.

It is exciting that the benefits of the Common Ground model in Canberra are now well accepted. In October 2016, Andrew Barr ACT Chief Minister committed to a second Common Ground.

A Roundtable hosted by the ACT Government in July saw representatives from the community

sector, government and private sector discussing the design and key elements for the next Common Ground — from who will live there, to governance and financial issues, and the building architecture.

It was heartening to hear others getting excited about the possibilities, and embrace the challenges ahead. Common Ground Canberra is particularly focused on improving the implementation and operating model and developing strong relationships with the broader community.

You can find more about Common Ground Canberra by referring to our website www.commongroundcanberra.org.au.

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Homelessness and Older Canberrans

Trish Low, Housing Options Advisor, COTA ACT

COTA ACT is the peak organisation in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) concerned with all issues related to ageing.

Housing is integral to the wellbeing of older people aged 65 years and over. Older people need to be able to access safe, secure, affordable housing that is appropriate to their circumstances in order to live independent, socially connected and active lifestyles. This not only benefits the individual but also leads to reduced budgetary costs of health care and aged care.¹

While not a highly visible problem, COTA ACT is concerned about the increasing number of older Canberrans, particularly women, who do not have secure and stable accommodation. The increasing number of requests for assistance received by COTA ACT show that growing old in Canberra is getting tougher. For older Canberrans, the rising cost of living, inadequate public transport and the lack of affordable accommodation are making life very difficult.

The current demand for rental accommodation is showing no signs of slowing down and the cost of rent is steadily increasing, with Canberra rental properties now commanding prices comparable to Sydney. The lack of affordable and accessible accommodation leaves few options for people faced with rental increases or Notices to Vacate. The private rental market is unaffordable for people living on a low fixed income, such as the Age Pension. A growing number of self-funded retirees also face similar hurdles as their income may not be dissimilar to an aged pension but they are often not eligible to receive the same discounts and concessions available to pensioners.

Older Canberrans who rent their homes are disproportionately more likely to be experiencing housing stress and lower wellbeing more generally.² People are making difficult choices between paying rent, paying increasingly costly utility bills, buying medications or food. Such choices have serious consequences for older people's health and wellbeing, often placing their lives at risk. Older renters face an uncertain future in the current housing climate with many finding entry into residential aged care their only option.

While this situation sounds impossible in a 'wealthy' city, it is the plight of many older Canberrans. The perception of Canberra as a young affluent society is a myth perpetuated by media reports and marketing. The real picture is one of growing financial stress and dwindling availability of supports and services for older people.

'Affordable housing' has become a buzz-word in Canberra but the reality is there is little available and competition is fierce. Older residents are rarely the first choice of landlords when there is the option to rent to a well-paid young professional person with a regular and more generous income.

Social and community housing is no longer a solution for older women. Waiting lists are long and eligibility requirements are stringent with inflexible financial and residential guidelines precluding many people from registering on financial grounds. The number of people, not just older Canberrans, who fall in the gap between meeting the financial restrictions for social housing and being able to afford private rental is rapidly growing.

COTA has found that many older people adopt a stoic attitude to their plight and are reluctant to seek assistance until matters reach a crisis point. Sometimes interventions or aid from service agencies can provide a temporary reprieve but some are not so lucky. Community service groups are finding themselves stretched beyond capacity to deliver support services needed. Traditional informal support provided by families has also diminished.

Crisis accommodation is not really suitable for older Canberrans. Older people who find themselves homeless may at best, move in with family or friends. At worst, they seek haven in shelters or cars. These are not ideal situations for anyone but older people find these situations particularly physically and psychologically stressful, creating further health problems.

Older Canberrans who find themselves homeless often do not have the opportunity to recover from their losses. The outlook is bleak when a person is not physically or financially capable of re-starting their lives. Older people can also face significant discrimination when seeking to re-enter the workforce.

COTA ACT calls for an urgent government/private sector collaboration to be established to protect older Canberrans by providing accommodation that is affordable, meets their changing needs as they grow older and is available at the time it is required, before it is too late.

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Chapter 3: Housing

Public Housing in the Canberra: The Pride and the Prejudice — A Public Policy Literature Classic?

Travis Gilbert, Executive Officer, ACT Shelter

Cornerstone of the Capital: 1920s – 1980s

The construction of publicly funded homes in Canberra pre-dates the establishment of State Housing Authorities by two decades. It is the cornerstone of development in the Capital, as the promise of housing tied to jobs became necessary in order to attract the volume of workers needed to construct a modern national capital. In 1913, Canberra had been chosen at the site for the nation's administrative capital, in large part because national leaders felt they could not award the title to Melbourne or Sydney without offending a large section of the voter base.¹

Over the next six decades public housing stock numbers would grow exponentially in Canberra relative to private dwellings and comprised the majority of homes in Canberra until the late 1970s.²

Most of these homes are still with us, either in private or public ownership. Many Canberrans would be familiar with the term 'ex-govvie', used to describe a particularly functional three-bedroom design, typically found in our garden suburbs in the inner-north and south. Canberrans can rightly be proud of our historic allocations of government-funded homes to the people who built our city and/or raised families here.

In other states, public housing was also a source of post-World War II pride. The promise of a secure home and job for returned service people was its foundation in most states.³

The 1940s to the 1980s was 'boom-time' for public housing in Australia. More than 500,000 homes were constructed to provide low-rent housing options for people priced out of home purchase. Hundreds

of thousands more would be made available for purchase by working people at terms more favourable than private financiers would offer — expanding the great Australian dream and providing housing stability.

1989 – 2007: Public Housing's Triple Threat

The next chapter in Australian public housing began in 1989.⁵

The 1989-96 Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement (CSHA) was a watershed moment in housing funding and policy in Australia.⁶ It was the last national housing Agreement to expire with more public housing nationally — than when it commenced — in both absolute numbers as well as proportionate to total households.⁷ On the surface this was a positive — but the below the headline figure, the 1989 Agreement was a harbinger of things to come.

There was a sharp decline in the number of annual public dwelling completions over the life of the Agreement. Just 6,863 new public

housing dwellings were completed in the last year of the 1989-1996 CSHA compared with 12,501 in the 1989-90 financial year.

This was the lowest number of annual public dwelling completions since 1947-48⁸ and a reflection of ideological shift in thinking about the role of government in the housing space.

Public housing's journey from a source of policy pride, to a target for prejudice, by 'recurrent affairs' programs and shock-jocks had begun...

Over the life of the next CSHA, the number of annual dwelling completions would halve again, leading to a fall in both the number and proportion of public rental homes relative to total housing stock for first time in more than five decades.⁹

The final two iterations of the CSHA saw annual completions of new public housing dwellings halved again from 6,000 in 1997 to 3,200 in 2007 (see table below)¹⁰:

Table 1: Public sector dwelling commencements, annual, Australia, 1970-2011



Source: ABS 2011, Dwelling Unit Commencements, Australia, Preliminary, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra

The 1989, 1996 and 2003 CSHAs coincided with a shift at a political level towards market liberalism as an approach to economic management. This shift favoured policies that included the phasing out of industry protection and government ownership and service delivery through deregulation, privatisation, contracting out, and taxation reduction.

Australia was one of the more enthusiastic nations to implement such an approach — under the Treasury of Paul Keating. In the housing arena, the shift was marked by an Industry Commission Report recommending the expansion of cash payments to tenants in non-government rental housing at the expense of government funded and managed housing,¹¹ I shall return to this issue later. As AHURI note:

‘... Consistent with the emergent economic and social management philosophy of economic rationalism or market liberalism, direct housing provision thus fell out of favour in the 1980s. There was the belief that indirect assistance through demand-side funding, for example Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA), was a more effective form of housing assistance than direct housing supply...’¹²

Since the 1980s, recurrent Commonwealth investment in public housing has fallen by more than 50 per cent while expenditure on CRA has more than tripled.¹³ CRA is indexed to the Consumer Price Index and prior to the 21st Century, this method afforded

reasonable protection from ‘after-housing poverty’ to tenants.¹⁴ Since 2000, this has generally not been the case in the ACT.

Allocation! Allocation! Allocation! Public Housing Targeted

At the same time as the Commonwealth reduced direct investment in public housing, States and Territories changed their allocations policies — possibly responding to the effects of the ideological shift briefly described above. This is known as ‘targeting’.

In the ACT, ‘targeting’ has three main elements:

narrowing the eligibility criteria for social housing (primary)

1. creating allocation mechanisms that target people assessed as being in the greatest need (secondary)
2. residualising through rent setting. This is principally achieved by charging market rents for households earning more than \$94,855 per annum, and is aimed at assuring that the provision of public housing assistance remains focussed on those who need it most.¹⁵
3. ‘Targeting’ has been an unmitigated fiscal disaster for the balance sheets of state and territory Housing Authorities. The ACT is no exception to this. At the risk of drawing attention to the Productivity Commission’s argument for grandfathering them

out of existence, this is primarily due to the ‘income-based rent setting’ model.¹⁶

Rent setting in public housing is a percentage of your anticipated yearly income, that is, ‘income-based rent’. For example, Housing ACT then determines your rent based on a percentage of your net or adjusted income. People whose incomes are below the threshold are on ‘rebated rents’. People above the threshold pay ‘market rent’. Over the past 25 years the proportion of tenants on rebated rents increased from around 62 per cent in 1984–85 to around 88 per cent in 2007–08 — while the number of employed people in public housing has fallen from 39 per cent to 14 per cent.¹⁷

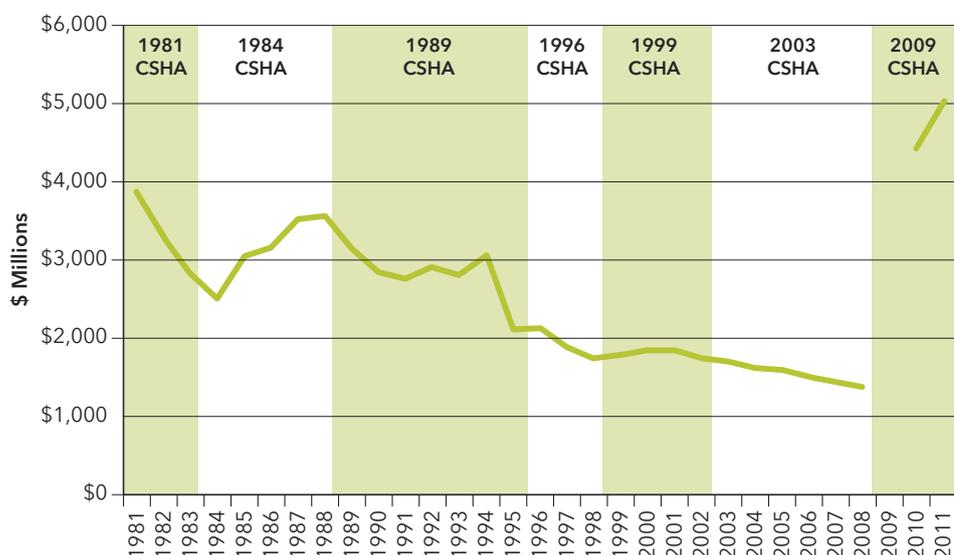
2008 Onwards: Stimulus but no Statement of Intent

In 2008, the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement was replaced by the *National Affordable Housing Agreement* and the *National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness* was morphed¹⁸ into a National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA) in 2017.¹⁹

The NHHA is financially at least, a dud from the ACT’s perspective. The Commonwealth will contribute about \$26 million towards the running costs of public housing and homelessness services in the ACT each financial year over the first five years of the current bilateral agreement.²⁰

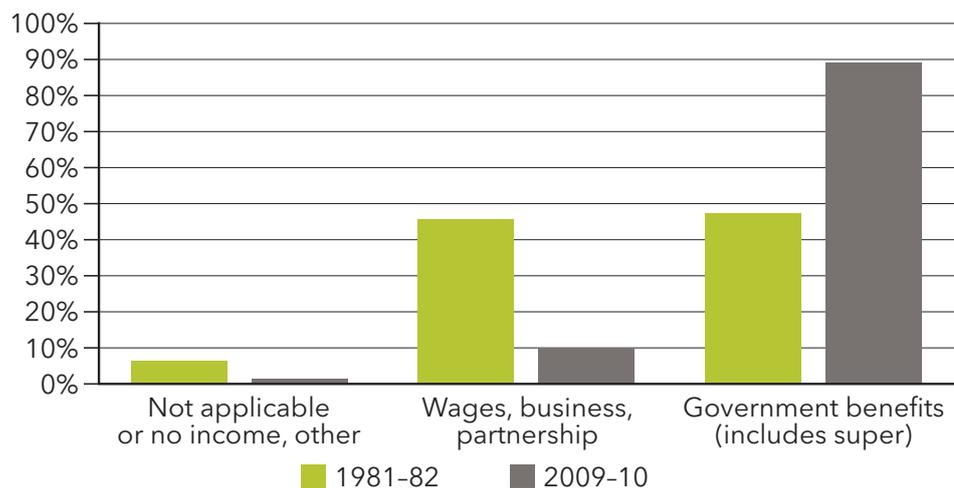
The cost of running public housing and homelessness services is more than the Commonwealth allocation, leaving the ACT to cough up \$145 million a year on average through to 2022–23.²¹ Forget matched funding, the Commonwealth offer to the ACT is less than one sixth of the funding needed.

We need to reframe the narrative if we want to change the story of public housing, locally and nationally. It needs to be changed from one of cost, to one of investment. Public housing has fallen from 12.4 per cent of Canberra’s housing stock to 7.1 per cent in the last 27 years, with applicants now waiting on average 1,000 days for a place.²² The NHHA provides not one dollar of growth funding to assist us to reverse this trend.



Source: Advisory Council for Inter-Government Relations 1985, SCRGSP 2006–2013

Figure 3. Primary income source of public housing tenants 1981-2009¹⁸



Source: ABS, *Income and Housing Survey*, 1981-2 and 2009-10 (reissue)

While social housing remains the only viable, affordable, safe and secure tenure for people experiencing homelessness in the ACT, it is vital to keep a focus on its role as an exit point.

In saying that, there is also necessarily a need to look at the wider context of affordable housing and affordable living as well as the issues of quality of life. The key is adequate choice of a diverse range of housing options, not just any 'property' but housing as part of communities, with connections to social and other services. While I understand the rationale for triaging to those with the highest need and the lowest incomes, I am not, nor will ever be a strong supporter of it. We need to put working people back into a social housing system that delivers stability of tenure as well as a reasonable rental income for Housing ACT.

- Targeting to highest need, lowest income households has starved Housing ACT of own-source income. This is primarily because the gap between income-based rent and the cost base required to maintain Housing ACT properties (known as 'costs rents' under the CSHA and different to market rent) has widened significantly due to inadequate indexing of income support payments and the increasing costs of maintaining aging housing stock.
- It has also turned public housing from a source of policy pride to a target of prejudice and stigma — reducing public support for it among the wider population. In saying this, social research commissioned by Housing ACT

in 2015 indicated a majority of Canberrans supported retaining public housing in their localities.

- Commonwealth investment in social housing has halved over the past three decades and the combination of these three factors; targeting, stigmatisation and reduced investment, has led the Productivity Commission to declare — almost excitedly, that Australia's social housing system is broken. However, remember that originally, the States and Territories were advised by the Industry Commission, (the forerunner to the Productivity Commission), to pursue the rent setting and allocation policies that the Productivity Commission now says are responsible for this broken system.

I would urge governments to think carefully before listening to the Productivity Commission this time around.

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We Are Not There Yet

Deb Phippen, Executive Officer, Tenants' Union ACT Inc.*

The Tenants' Union wants housing in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) to be based on a fair and equitable experience for all inhabitants regardless of what type of housing they are living in and what their tenure is (that is, irrespective of whether they own their home, or they rent it).

The Past to Present

The ACT, with a high proportion of students and contractors (government and otherwise), has consistently been a town of renters. In 1995-6, when the Residential Tenancies Act (RTA) was introduced, 32 per cent of the population rented, with the same proportion in 2015-16. According to 2016 Census figures, with a population of 382,000 in 142,664 dwellings, 45,000 properties (or approximately 32 per cent of dwellings), were rented.

The figures show that despite an increase in the number of households (11,762), we have seen a drop in total households living in public housing properties (of 2,055, from

11 per cent to six per cent of total households between 1996 and 2016). The most significant increase has been in the number of properties being managed by real estate agents. This illustrates a significant loss of housing provided for social benefit and a growing reliance on housing where the sole objective is profit.

While the fervent hope is that the ACT Government halts this decrease in public housing stock (and even turns it around), the reliance on privately owned rental accommodation is likely to continue and even grow. This was illustrated most recently in the announcement regarding funding of an 'affordable rental real estate management model'.³

An aim of all tenant advocates is to see rental housing acknowledged as a valid long-term housing tenure on par with home ownership, which recognises the right of all people to safe, secure, stable, appropriate and affordable housing. To this end, what we need to see in the future is tenancy legislation that ensures people are living in homes that are

of a sufficient standard that they are not at risk of health or financial problems. It must ensure that all people in the ACT are able to live in their homes and feel comfortable and secure, and able to fully participate in the ACT community.

Renters must be able to live in and use their homes in a manner that conforms to general community expectations without unreasonable interference by property owners (whether private individuals, businesses or community organisations) and their agents.

Renters must not have to live with the constant uncertainty they may be arbitrarily removed from their homes. This can be achieved without putting property owners' investments and businesses at risk in any way.

Unfortunately, we currently have a way to go before this is the renting experience in the ACT. The Tenants' Union has put forward its position to the ACT Government as part of the RTA review, with a hope that we will see change in the near future. The main elements are outlined below.

Number of Households				
Management type	1996 ¹	2006	2011	2016
Housing ACT	10,636	9,313	9,482	8,581
Real estate agent	22,816 (no breakdown of management of other tenures provided)	14,410	17,430	23,285
Private landlord		8,760	10,525	10,100
Housing co-op/community/church		457	601	653
Other (caravan/residential park, employer, Defence Housing)		1,621	2,024	2,251
Landlord not identified	127	580	523	471
Total Rented Households	33,579	35,141	40,585	45,341
Total Households	104,117	122,900	135,037	142,664

Note: 2006-2016 table data from 2016 Census Community Profiles - ACT, Time Series Profile.²

Standards

Many people would be surprised to know that there are no effective standards applying to rental properties. This is in contrast to most other goods and services available for purchase which must meet stringent health and safety standards.

Because there are no standards, housing can be available for rent even though it:

- lacks basic amenities such as adequate heating and insulation, running hot water, and a working oven/stove
- is insecure because of inadequate locks on external doors and windows
- is unsafe or unhealthy because of structural defects.

Currently, and for the foreseeable future, there is a shortage of affordable rental properties, and many tenants have no choice but to rent properties that lack even a basic level of amenity and energy efficiency.

All rental housing should be regulated to meet minimum community standards for health, safety and energy efficiency.

Use of Properties

Rental properties are not just commodities. They are people's homes and renters should be free to live in and use their home as others in the community do (within the limitations of reasonableness). This includes being able to make minor non-structural modifications, keeping pets and ensuring that rights to privacy and quiet enjoyment are respected. To achieve this there must be clarification of these rights — the introduction of penalties to discourage bad behaviour by lessors and stronger regulation of real estate agents.

Housing Security and Stability

It is widely acknowledged that moving house is one of the most disruptive and stressful experiences in people's lives. If this is the result of external factors beyond an individual's control, it is even more traumatic.

Regarding renting, tenants can find themselves facing the prospect of finding a new home without any prior knowledge or them being



Portal by Stephanie Hrcan-Brown

at fault with as little as four weeks' notice (or less for other renters).

With a vacancy rate of 0.8 per cent⁴ and discrimination in the rental market, this can put most tenants in very difficult circumstances. For those who are disadvantaged for any reason, this can be extreme and result in people entering into agreements for homes that are not suitable, not appropriate and even unaffordable.

Unfortunately for tenants, the RTA currently provides for 'no cause' termination, and while the notice period is 26 weeks and generally allows people time to find alternative accommodation, this still results in the disruption and possible trauma of moving without a fair reason. In addition, the reality is that this provision is regularly used (as a threat and in practice) when tenants try to assert their rights.

A significant improvement in stability and security can be achieved by ensuring that rental agreements can only be terminated for just

and identified reasons, and that a realistic notice period is set that does not force renters into hardship.

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* This article first appeared in the ACTCOSS Update Journal, Issue 85, Spring 2018

Disability Housing in the Post-NDIS World

Shannon Pickles, Senior Manager Operations, Havelock Housing

Firstly, let me provide the caveat that this is not a peer reviewed research paper, nor is it based on robust data obtained from surveys or other statistical reports. It is rather a summary on Havelock Housing's experience as the largest provider of Disability Housing in the ACT and the regular feedback and discussions we have had with persons living with a disability, their guardians and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) support providers in the region.

After an extended process of careful handover and planning, in February 2017 Havelock Housing took on the disability housing portfolio from Capital Community Housing to become the ACT's largest Disability Housing provider. We currently manage 93 properties that accommodate 200 persons living with a disability. Tenants range from persons with a mild intellectual disability in need of affordable accommodation from an understanding landlord, through to those with severe physical and intellectual impairment that require 24/7 support services on site in a highly modified property.

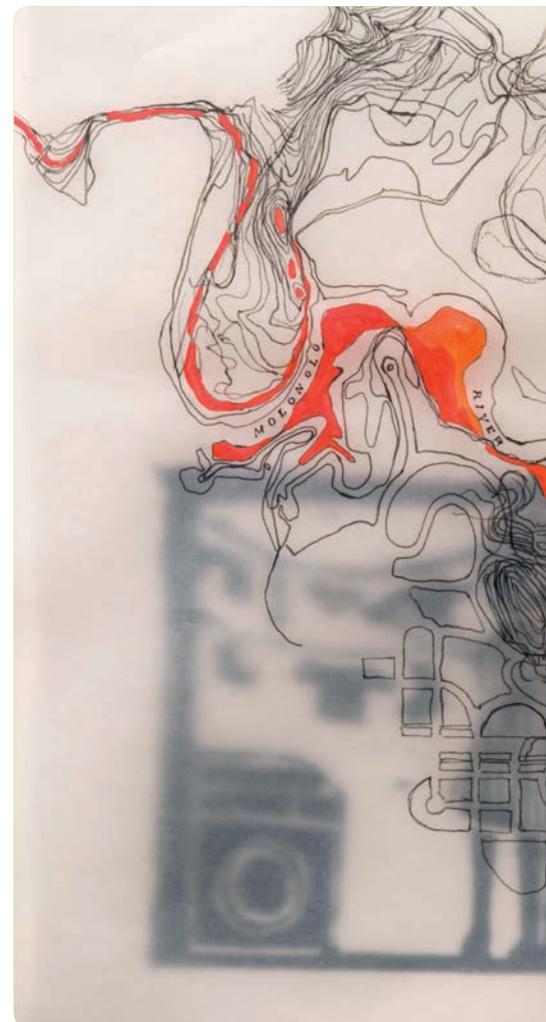
One of the primary differences about Disability Housing is for focus not to rest on persons of the highest need, rather those that are the best match for properties. It remains common that on any given day we will have anywhere up to a dozen potential vacancies, and a list of 20 to 30+ persons living with a disability seeking housing that we cannot match them to. I am aware on the face of it this seems like madness, and many of you are probably now thinking, what is this guy's number? I need to ring him right now as I have X amount of people that can go into those vacancies today!

So what has changed? The answer in essence is the introduction of the NDIS and the powers of choice and control. While a very good and positive philosophy, it has led to a much greater level of complexity in terms of matching. When looking at a house matching consideration here are the factors that come into play (some new some old):

- *The support provider* — People are often invested in one particular support provider. They have a relationship with them, know the workers and like their philosophy. However, the practical nature of funding and managing a group house means it is almost impossible to have two providers providing 24/7 care in the one property. So if a room becomes available in a property managed by provider X, a potential new tenant must be happy to stop using their current support provider and switch their supports to provider X (at least for their core supports, many of them still use multiple providers for things such as groups, transport, etc.)
- *Matching demographics* — Given that these are long term tenancies it is vital that all tenants are happy with the mix. Age, gender, verbal capacity and personality can all be driving factors that prevent matches occurring
- *Location* — Many people have very specific requirements for location. Has to be within X minutes from my parent as they are a main support, cannot be further than X minutes from the local shops, can only take something southside, etc
- *Modifications/accessibility* — Often a key factor. Whether or not they need full wheelchair access (and whether it is a large or standard wheelchair), level and type of bathroom

and kitchen modifications, flat access, width of corridors etc.

- *Do the guardians get along?* — We have seen a number of times when the sole factor for an option not working is that the guardians do not get along. Some guardian groups have strict expectations of how much involvement all guardians must have — some however, have no expectations.
- *They cannot live with others* — The behaviours involved are so extreme that there is a safety risk for other tenants to share with them. This usually translates



to they would like/need their own two-bedroom freestanding property in a quiet area.

- *Matched funding levels* — Often you may have a perfect match of all factors but the potential tenant coming in only has a mid-range of core supports funding in their plan and the current tenants in the house all have 24/7 funding. Some support providers have developed models to make this work, but the majority cannot, which means persons with 24/7 funding can only be matched to other tenants with 24/7 funding.
- *Accessing funding* — This by far is the number one issue impacting on organising a match. Often the level of funding in a person's plan will be insufficient, other times they are moving from a three person share to a four person share, or their physical condition has deteriorated and they now need 24/7 support. In those situations they will require an NDIS plan reassessment and review. This more often than not takes months. Then there is the persons that are

leaving the family home for the first time no longer having mum/dad as their primary support, sometimes being introduced to the concept of the NDIS for the first time. This is a daunting and very time consuming process.

What this ultimately means is our current matching timeframes for a vacancy vary from six to 18 months. This often creates significant challenges for those involved, primarily financial ones. Support providers are not paid for vacancies, so if it takes months for a suitable replacement to be found in a group property they are faced with either reducing the amount of staffing on site, or wearing a large financial loss for that period.

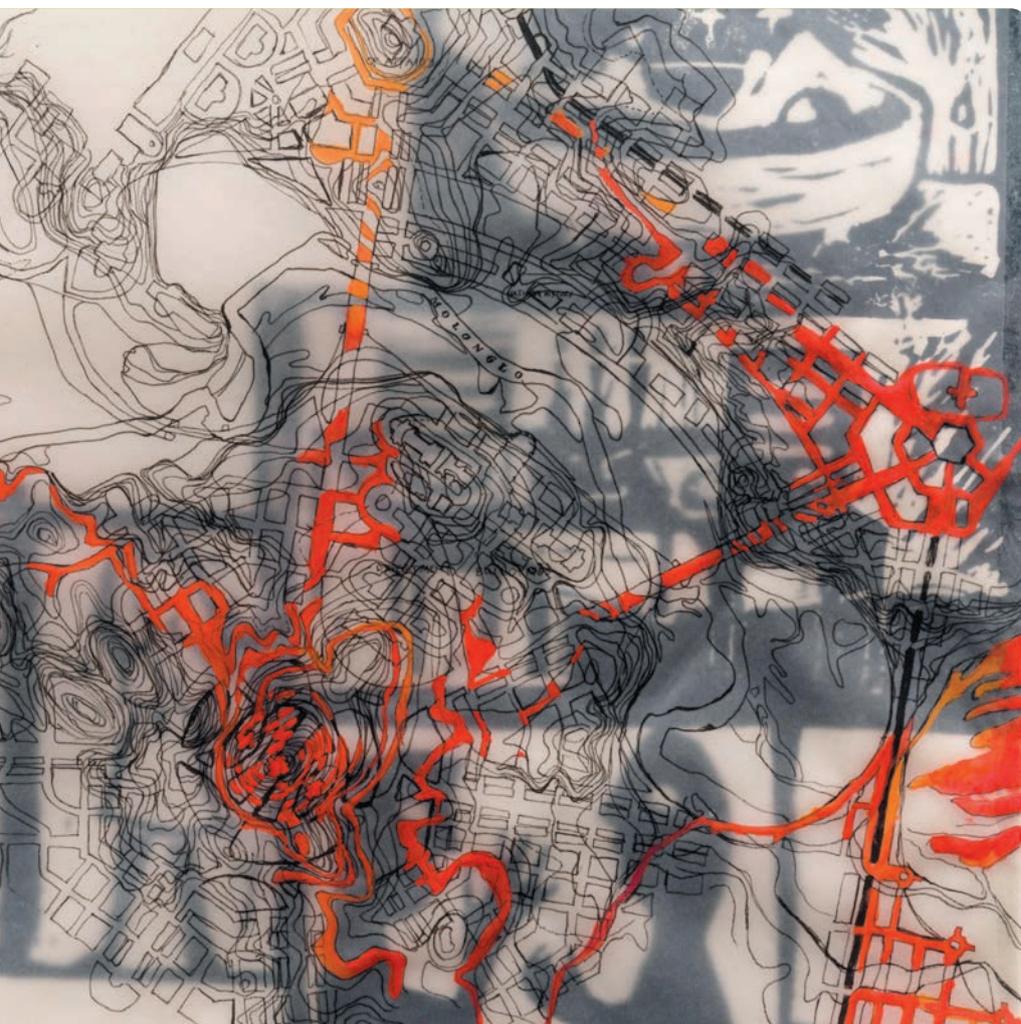
On a similar note, property owners/managers will similarly receive no rental income for that same period. This obviously leads to a situation where the desire to create an ideal matching situation, is constantly at war with the financial imperative of a house's ongoing operation.

Another new exacerbating factor is the sheer amount of new providers that are now in this field. Barely a month goes by when we are not approached by a new support provider who states they are now in the market and would like us to provide them with houses to start managing 24/7 properties. In the ACT there are currently over 58 pages of approved NDIS support providers.

This has led to some situations where 'poaching' occurs. Support provider's actively encouraging people to leave one organisation and come to theirs, sometimes with the offer of incentives. I should state in many cases the tenants in question are usually unhappy with the current service provider/provision, and the incentives can be as innocuous as a promise that we will not engage in X behaviour with you, or we can offer you a room in X location closer to mum. This is in many cases a good thing and a better outcome for the person involved, but it does inevitably lead to the entire process of filling that newly created vacancy all over again, and potentially another six to 18 months of a room sitting vacant.

So we return to the situation where we have a lot of vacancies and have great difficulty in filling them. This article does not even start to touch upon the fact there is just not enough properties to meet demand, or that the type of properties in the system are often old and need work — and that private investment is non-existent. It is often a 'loss investment' so the burden of most disability accommodation rests with public housing authorities, and the fact that there is a large number of persons living with disability that are not even entitled to NDIS funding.

Havelock Housing have been taking a number of steps to try and tackle these issues, and continues to refine processes to try and create a smoother and quicker method of matching. These range from the development of a new website <https://www.havelock.asn.au> (with the appreciated financial support of the ACT Office for Disability) with a Disability Housing Hub which looks at options, resources and research, a free vacancy listing service and application service for all Disability properties/vacancies in the region (open to all accommodation providers).



if the heart is there, it's home by Elizabeth Errol & Annie McCarthy

Housing for Migrants and Refugees in the ACT

Werner Padarin, Caritas Christi Conference, St Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn

Housing Affordability: Work and Welfare Entitlements

Migrants and refugees come to Australia and to the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) in different categories which determine both the amount of their income (and hence their ability to afford housing) and their eligibility for public housing. It is therefore relevant to give an overview of those categories.

Asylum seekers are people who claim to have fled their home countries or are afraid to return there for fear of persecution, but whose claims remain to be verified. Depending on their date and method of arrival these people may or may not:

- receive a living allowance, or Status Resolution Support Service allowance (SRSS) equivalent to 89 per cent of Newstart while they await the primary or departmental decision on their refugee status claim (this allowance is ceased once they proceed to appeal a negative decision)
- be permitted to work.

For unauthorised maritime arrivals ('boat people') their date of arrival matters greatly since Commonwealth Government policy has become progressively harsher. All arrivals since 2014 have been transported to Nauru leaving relatively few of these people who arrived before that date in Australia. Policy changes are still being implemented with respect to ceasing SRSS payments to persons previously eligible, but who are deemed capable of work.

Employment for asylum seekers is very difficult even if they are permitted to work. They may lack English communication skills, not have employment references, and have no surety about how

long they may be able to remain resident in the ACT, and that is not to mention any physical or mental disability some might be suffering as a result of persecution in their home country. Nevertheless, most asylum seekers in the ACT have some casual employment, generally thanks to substantial community support efforts.

Refugees are asylum seekers whose claims of persecution have been verified as meeting the relevant United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) criteria. Refugees whose refugee status was determined overseas and who are then granted an 'offshore' refugee or humanitarian visa come to Australia as permanent residents, generally with immediate full eligibility for social security benefits. Typically they rely on those benefits for a year while attending free English classes before trying to enter the workforce.

Persons who enter Australia with a valid visa, for example,

as a tourist or a diplomat, and subsequently successfully apply for protection also become permanent residents and are immediately eligible for security benefits.

However, persons who arrived in Australia by boat will now be allowed only temporary residence, either for three years with a Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) or for five years with a Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV). These visas carry limited entitlement to social security payments. SHEV holders do have a chance of eventual permanent residency provided (among a number of other factors,) that they do not rely on social security payments for more than 18 months, and that they reside in a 'regional area' — the ACT qualifies for this purpose.

Asylum seekers whose claims of persecution have been rejected under the now narrowed interpretation of the UNHCR convention's definition of a refugee, and who have exhausted all their avenues of appeal or decided not to appeal are usually deported to their country of origin, or they return 'voluntarily'. Those that remain, and Iranians cannot be forcibly returned, just hang on in the community as best they can with no visa and no entitlements.

Migrants come to Australia principally under a family or a skilled category. The latter should arrive to a job with earnings to put them above other migrants in terms of housing affordability.

In the family stream most visas are initially only temporary for two years, but convertible to their permanent counterparts under normal circumstances. They mostly require some form of sponsorship including, for some



Home Is Where The Art Is by Art Haven (Ainslie Village)

of the visa categories, an *Assurance of Support (AoS)* that the migrant will not access social welfare for a period of two years (an option exists in some cases to speed up visa processing by paying more for it and incurring a ten-year AoS). In any case, the family concerned will have paid a significant sum for the visa as well as having, in some cases, to provide a bank guarantee for the AoS. For Temporary Visa holders, even when there is no AoS requirement, there is no or very limited eligibility for social security.

Housing Demand for Migrants and Refugees

Only limited and dated information is publicly available for the numbers of migrants and refugees arriving in the ACT. A report for 2016–17¹ shows that, of the persons in the permanent (that is, family or skilled) migration program arriving in Australia, some 3,700 intended to reside in the ACT and that this number had been fairly constant over the preceding years. Another report² for the year shows that 2024 primary visas (equating to the number of family units) were granted during 2014–15 for work positions or families in the ACT with total number of visas (that is, the number of persons) being 4,464.

The 2016 national Census showed the ACT's total population had grown by some 49,000 persons since 2011. The migration program has therefore contributed in the order of 40 per cent to the population increase, and presumably thereby also to the housing demand.

Although critical in terms of potential homelessness, asylum seekers in the ACT are very small in number. No data is maintained and the little we know is of the people already in the ACT rather than about people arriving. We are aware currently of at least 60 family (or single person) households. A 2016 newspaper article³ citing 150 potential beneficiaries of the ACT being declared a SHEV 'regional area' suggests that was the estimated number of asylum seekers at that time.

Eligibility for ACT Housing Social Housing Assistance

Permanent residents including migrants and refugees and TPV holders (but currently not SHEV holders) are eligible for social housing after six months residence in the ACT.

However, while sponsored migrants under an AoS arrangement can register for housing, early allocation is not offered while that arrangement is in place or while they are employed and receiving an income. A housing allocation may, however, still be possible once the AoS has broken down and a minimum Special Benefit granted by Centrelink.⁴

Refugee Transitional Housing Program

This is a now defunct program⁵ for refugee families that provided some transitional properties where they could receive Commonwealth Government settlement services before moving into stable private rental accommodation. There are now some efforts to reinstate the scheme.

Asylum Seekers Transitional Accommodation (ASTA)

This program, pioneered by Companion House, the ACT community-based torture and trauma counselling centre, relies on a small rolling stock of seven three-bedroom ACT Housing properties ear-marked for renovation or demolition, to provide accommodation for single, male, asylum seekers. The scheme is managed by EveryMan, a Canberra organisation focused on men's issues. Tenants are required to pay a small rent.

Acute Rental Support Group Assistance

A group comprising Canberra Refugee Support, Companion House, St Vincent de Paul Society (through Caritas Christi Conference) and Red Cross has been meeting to work with asylum seekers having to survive in private rental accommodation, but without any income or ability to work. Some 12 family groups have been in this situation. The group has approached the ACT Government for assistance and obtained one small grant, but over the last few months these rentals have been mostly funded by contributions from these organisations themselves.

ACT Government New Support Service for Asylum Seekers

Minister Berry announced in early September that \$1.8 million has been allocated over four years to establish a new medium-term accommodation and support service for asylum seekers and 'other migrants with

uncertain immigration status' who are in need of housing assistance. The service is to be based on a program of consultation to commence in the 'coming months' with Vinnies and other parties.⁶ The consultation program has not yet begun.

Conclusion

The major housing demand from the migrant and refugee sector is likely from permanent family and skilled stream migrants. While every migration must include stress, the income level or the family support generally available to this group of newcomers places them near par with any permanent resident seeking housing.

On the other end of the scale, we have a relatively small, but critical group of people suffering immensely greater stress; having absolutely no income, unable to work and ineligible for public housing. Moreover, there is no certainty about how long their situations may continue — resolution may come tomorrow or in ten years' time. These people, including families with children, are forced to survive all this time on charity contributions. Hopefully, their housing situation will be improved under the ACT Government's newly announced support service.

The risk of homelessness varies across the scale of family units that are fully waged, those that have full social service entitlements and public housing eligibility, those with the smaller SRSS allowances, and without that eligibility. The risk is highest for those with no income, no prospect of work and no social housing.

Endnotes

1. Report on Migration Programmes, <http://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about/reports-publications/research-statistics/statistics/live-in-australia>
2. <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about/reports-publications/research-statistics/statistics/live-in-australia/state-and-territory>
3. <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/national/act/150-of-canberras-resident-refugees-would-benefit-from-act-haven-push-20160515-govlti.html>
4. http://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/hcs/policies/eligibility_for_public_housing_assistance
5. <http://www.hansard.act.gov.au/hansard/2016/week07/2255.htm>
6. Minister Berry's letter to Mr Tim McKenna of Caritas Christi Conference, dated 3 September 2018.

Housing Must Be Accessible as Well as Affordable

Robert Altamore, Executive Officer, People With Disabilities ACT*

The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Government emphasises housing affordability as a key policy priority. It is only right that a government should do this.

People With Disabilities ACT (PWD ACT) has actively participated in the intensive program of community consultations leading up to the development and announcement of the Government's affordable housing initiatives. PWD ACT has welcomed and supported these initiatives.

PWD ACT members have told us at our housing morning tea held in April 2018 that housing affordability is a real issue for them. We know this from the anecdotal evidence of our members and the local and national research. An example is a recent housing snapshot taken by an ACT welfare organisation which indicated that at the time of the snapshot, there was no rental property which was both affordable and accessible.

National research repeatedly shows that social measures relating to housing affordability such as education, employment and income are measures in which people with disabilities experience disproportionate social disadvantage.

In our participation in the ACT Government consultations around affordable housing, PWD ACT has had one simple message. It is not enough that housing is affordable; housing must be accessible. An affordable house is of no help if you cannot get through the front door, use the kitchen or bathroom, or host visitors in the lounge room.

The ACT Government is taking initiatives to increase the stock

of accessible housing available to the community. But it can do more. Some of the things the ACT Government could do are:

- make allocations from its Housing Innovations Fund for initiatives which will increase the stock of accessible housing in the ACT
- hold a roundtable on accessible housing to bring government, private developers and people with disabilities together to generate initiatives to promote housing accessibility in the ACT

- take regulatory measures to promote the provision of accessible housing
- having set the example, the ACT should take strong positions in Commonwealth-State ministerial discussions in support of national regulatory measures to promote housing that is accessible, liveable and visitable in accordance with national guidelines.

* This article first appeared in the *ACTCOSS Update Journal*, Issue 85, Spring, 2018



Artemis, Morag, Patti by Elizabeth Errol, 2017

Chapter 4: Responding to Domestic and Family Violence and Women's Homelessness

The Complexity of Domestic and Family Violence — 30 Years On

Mirjana Wilson, Chief Executive Officer, Domestic Violence Crisis Service, Canberra

Introduction

Domestic and family violence is acknowledged as one of the leading contributors to homelessness both in the ACT and nationally. The Domestic Violence Crisis Service (DVCS) has been working in this field for more than 30 years. The following article provides an insight into the evolution of policy and service response to domestic and family violence.

The longer that DVCS has worked with domestic and family violence, the more open we have become to its

complexity. If two decades ago you had asked us why domestic violence occurs, we would have answered very differently to how we would now. Years ago we would have said it was entirely about male abuse of power and control. When we think of most relationships where there is violence and controlling behaviours, predominantly and overwhelmingly, there are issues of male abuse of power and control. However, we also think that this alone is a narrow story and one that leads to a narrow response. We think that if we see

every situation as the 'same,' then we are not really listening to the individual story. Every story is different and therefore requires an individual response. Over the past 30-years DVCS has grappled with developing this individualised response.

The men who use violence in their relationships can be as varied as the women who are living with violence. We need to be careful that we do not label people and their situations and believe that we know what is best for them, because we are not the experts of their lives and experiences — they are. For example, years ago we would also have said the violence always gets worse. That the only thing that would ultimately make it acceptable for the woman and her children, is for them to leave. Many, many women tell us that they do not want to leave their partner — they just want him to change his violent, abusive or controlling behaviour. Some of these women will at some point decide to leave because they no longer hold out any hope that he will change. Some women will stay and the violence will continue. In some relationships the man will stop using violence.

DVCS really believes in the possibility of change, and that people have the capacity to make change. I do not know where it would leave us if ever we were to lose the hope of people having the ability to make the decision to change their lives.

While we hang onto this hope, for quite different reasons, the last three years have been some of most challenging years I have experienced in my time in this sector. Our new working landscape can be best described as one where we are no longer working in, and within anonymity. The reality is that the domestic and family violence



conversation has been thrust into mainstream society. In part, this is due to Rosie Batty, our 2015 Australian of the Year, and in part because of the deaths that have occurred, not only in our community, but in many communities all over this country. We now have ads on prime time TV highlighting the issues of domestic and family violence, inviting us all to engage and do something as a community.

Locally, DVCS continues to combine forces with different parts of the media to highlight the domestic and family violence issues our community and service system are wrestling with. One of these issues is the unprecedented increase in the demand for our services. At the same time, the need to have the issues of family and domestic violence at the forefront of the public domain, and the need and to promote DVCS service offerings, creates an ongoing dilemma. For example, how do we ensure that our awareness raising does not set people up with the expectations of support that cannot be met? Likewise, what should be our next step now that public awareness is almost saturated with images of women being killed by those that should love and respect them the most?

In the past 30-years DVCS has been through an extensive process of change. In the first eight to ten years of our operation we made few changes. However, we are now an organisation that continually monitors, values and implements change as required, to ensure that we are always aiming to provide the best service we can to our clients and to the broader ACT community.

The changes we have made reflect changing ideas from the community and we are guided by our experiences of working with people subjected to domestic violence, and with people who use violence in their relationships. We recognise that the vast majority of people who are subjected to domestic violence are women and children and that the vast majority of those using violence in their relationships are men.

There are also other significant challenges and other stories that are not being told. For example, there are significant numbers of Aboriginal women facing unimaginable levels of

violence — violence that is normalised because it is so widespread in some communities. Similarly, we know that women with disabilities experience violence at appalling rates in their homes, in their institutional settings and when they are trying to access support. Transgender women have also experienced increased rates of intimate partner violence and abuse in daily life. And somewhat contentiously perhaps, we need to better understand men as victims of violence, and have conversations about male victims.

The priority of DVCS was, and remains, safety. Changes to our organisation have significantly altered how we work and what we now offer to our clients around issues of safety, both immediate and long-term.

DVCS has made a commitment to the ACT community to do its work in a more all-inclusive way — to offer services and interventions to all members of the family who experience domestic and family violence. The last two years has been about exploring how we can do this. The mantra voiced by many of our clients is that they want us to be there for their partners, that they just want the violence to stop, but they do not want their relationship to end. In order to respect and really hear what women were telling us they want- and given the considerable numbers of women that stayed at home, often with their partner — it is crucial that we find ways of engaging respectfully with these men.

DVCS' crisis intervention arm continues to be the primary gateway for our other service offerings, that is, legal and court advocacy, support and outreach to children impacted by having lived with and/or having experienced violence, and a range of support groups for women as they take steps to heal. We have exceeded all expectations considering how much demand has been placed on us and how much we have been able to deliver.

We will be evolving further as an organisation this year so that we can better meet the needs of the Canberra community. We will be consolidating new service offerings, for example; *Room4Change* will be supporting men who use violence

and/or controlling behaviours and who are seeking a different pathway in life — because working with men to reduce their violence and controlling behaviours works to increase safety options for women and children; and we will be assisting women and their children who choose to remain in the home after violence — this includes a raft of enhanced security upgrades and options that have previously not been available to members of our community.

The solution to ending men's use of violence against women needs to be coordinated, long-term and collaborative work. This is no longer 'just' women's business or solely the job of crisis services, refuges or governments — and there are no quick, easy fixes. It is no longer good enough to look to others for reasons or solutions. At present we have an incredibly stretched support system that for decades has had to fight for adequate funding, and a sector that continues to be undervalued and under pressure. Of course, long-term funding for well-resourced services that are specialised and experienced in working with women, families and the communities impacted by violence and trauma is needed.

However, the long-term solution is intergenerational change that requires all men and women to commit to challenging gender inequality and violence-supportive attitudes. But, we also need to keep learning and listening to those that are most affected by domestic and family violence — their stories are not all the same. When these stories start sounding the same to us, then we are placing ourselves as experts on people lives, which can include believing that we know what is best for them.

While at DVCS we hold that the root cause of gender-based violence is gender inequity, we also consistently work with every client as an individual and recognise their individual story.

As an organisation that embraces change and reflective practice, we look forward to further challenging ourselves in this complex work. We have to keep doing this until we have taken significant steps to ending men's use of violence against women. We cannot afford not to!

ACT Safer Families Assistance

Housing and Community Services, Community Services Directorate, ACT Government

One of the costs of domestic and family violence is that it is the primary cause of women and children experiencing, or at risk of experiencing homelessness. Domestic violence affects all cultures, ages and socio-economic groups, but victims are overwhelmingly women and children.

Nationally, one third of Australian women have experienced violence by someone who is known to them. Intimate partner violence is the top health risk factor to Australian women aged between 18 and 44. The Australian Bureau of Statistics confirms that close to half of all Australians have experienced violence since the age of 15, including one in six women, and one in 16 men. This is a national issue, which must also be addressed at a state and territory level where support can respond to local community needs.

Housing ACT plays a key role in the provision of safe and secure housing for women and children, particularly for low-income women who cannot afford private rental or home ownership. Housing ACT also acknowledges the impacts of domestic and family violence on the safety and security of housing for women and children more broadly.

Housing ACT has recently updated an assistance program aimed at supporting victims seeking to escape family violence. The new Safer Families Assistance program offers eligible victims of family violence \$2,000 to assist them with sustaining or re-establishing their family home. This program is targeted at people not already receiving housing assistance in the form of public housing.

The Safer Families Assistance recognises there are a range of costs incurred by people seeking to escape family violence that impede their ability to establish or sustain a family home. This includes activities that assist members of the household to have a sense of normality and connection to their community, school and workplace.

Applicants must be referred by a service in the Territory that works to address family violence, or another form of community support service that forms the view that family violence has or is occurring.

Funding for the Safer Families Assistance program forms part of the ACT Government's 2016-17 Safer Families initiative, investing more than \$20 million over four years to deliver multiple programs to address domestic

and family violence. These will build on current initiatives already running across the territory.

Some of the current and planned programs managed and funded by the Safer Families Initiative include:

- stronger integrated case management services for survivors of domestic or family violence
- training for frontline community, emergency, health, and education services staff to identify family violence to enable early support
- funding for the Domestic Violence Crisis Service and the Canberra Rape Crisis Centre
- a residential behaviour change program for men who use or at risk of using violence.

More information is available on the Safer Families Assistance factsheet at http://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/hcs/publications/fact_sheets.



Untitled by Marianne Mettes

The Making of Hidden Women

Leah Dwyer, Policy and Engagement Coordinator, YWCA Canberra

YWCA Canberra launched the Hidden Women mini-documentary, featuring some of our housing clients, during National Homelessness Week to shift community perceptions on homelessness and highlight the unique circumstances leading to older women experiencing homelessness.

In developing this storytelling project, YWCA Canberra enlisted a suite of professionals to work with the women, including counsellors, case managers and a local digital production company whose corporate values aligned with those of YWCA Canberra. This article explores the making of Hidden Women and the role of values-based partnerships in advocating on social and economic policy issues.

Decades of economic inequality have led to older women today becoming the fastest growing cohort of those seeking assistance from local housing crisis services. The women, like those featured in Hidden Women, have often had conventional working and housing histories but when their relationships break down or their spouses pass on they can find themselves in crisis, but ineligible for housing services. This is a growing, though still hidden, problem and one which YWCA Canberra was eager to draw attention to.

A digital storytelling project was considered a powerful and accessible means to convey the circumstances of Hidden Women, but it also carried responsibility in how the stories were identified and explored. In working with this cohort, it was important that the women felt a sense of empowerment through their own storytelling and that they were fully engaged throughout the process.

Following approval for a grant from the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Office of Veterans and Seniors, the project was collaboratively managed by YWCA Canberra's advocacy team and housing case workers. Ensuring the needs of the women were met and that the project complied with our trauma informed service framework was a priority for YWCA Canberra. To manage this, we had a case worker and counsellor present during conception and filming, obtained consent through their participation in storytelling workshops and identified and respected boundaries before and during filming. Their approval was also essential in confirming the final cut of the film that would be shared with the public.

During the early project scoping phase, the case manager sat down with the women to discuss the project and their role in the film as well as the desired advocacy outcomes. A number of enthusiastic 'yeses' were taken while others declined the invitation to be involved. Project planning also saw local production company Rowdy Digital come on-board. Rowdy Digital, a local female owned enterprise, was selected to participate as their corporate agenda is steered by commitment to women's social and economic empowerment. Their involvement was a natural fit for YWCA Canberra.

Following participants being identified, YWCA Canberra invited Rowdy Digital to meet the women on a regular basis prior to filming in order to build rapport. When it came time to conduct the interviews, Rowdy used a small production team to undertake filming and a YWCA Canberra counsellor was present

to assist the women manage any trauma or distress that emerged.

The interview questions were simple and allowed for personal storytelling; 'where have you been? Where are you now? What can you teach people?' The final question, the learning aspect, was critical to *Hidden Women*; first person accounts of gaps and service issues should underpin housing policy and service design. The valuable insight of personal storytelling comes through in the film, with calls for older women to have safety and choice regarding where they live and for greater consideration of different housing models, such as group homes.

Hidden Women is ultimately an empathetic film about empowerment through personal crises and its success is a result of collaboration and respect. According to Rowdy Digital's co-director Llewella Jago, respect for the women and the subject matter was critical; 'we had to respect what sat behind the story, and the storytelling experience had to be one that was ultimately positive for those involved.'

As *Hidden Women* came together, the YWCA Canberra case manager continued liaising between the production team and the women themselves to keep them updated about the progress of the film itself and the interest it was generating. The final product is an example of working ethically and sensitively with lived experience and it also demonstrates the power of digital storytelling and values-based relationships, such as that between YWCA Canberra and Rowdy Digital. That values-based approach is ultimately what makes *Hidden Women* so genuine: Rowdy



My Kitchen by Carmen Carlsford

Digital and YWCA Canberra went into the project motivated by values, rather than a commercial motivation. For Llewella Jago this values-based framework facilitated the message authenticity, 'you can't control what is said in an interview, so don't edit content to suit a preconceived message, otherwise it's just a sales pitch'.

Thoughtful and well told human stories have the capacity to make the leap from intangible policy to real-life situations with consequences. For an

organisation like YWCA Canberra, that works in both service provision and policy advocacy, *Hidden Women* has allowed for a showcasing of these streams and an innovative way to get governments and community to understand the emerging crisis in older women's housing insecurity. The final product ultimately removes a lot of myths around homelessness.

In the period since the *Hidden Women* was launched it has been viewed more than 4,000 times across YWCA Canberra's social

media platforms and website. One of the women featured has gone on to undertake further media training to continue to develop her natural communication and advocacy skills. The film itself has received endorsements and shares from Anti-Poverty Week, Mercy Foundation, Canberra Community Law, Equality Rights Alliance, Women's Centre for Health Matters as well as politicians and local crisis services. You can view *Hidden Women* on YWCA Canberra's website.

There is Always Room for Change

Nina Birkl, Team Leader, *Room4Change* Men's Behaviour Change Program

Men's behaviour change work in Australia has recently been under the spotlight with increased public expectation and interest in how we might engage men in stopping their use of power, control and violence. In the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) this has been reflected through the funding of programs such as *Room4Change*, which aim to improve the safety of women and children and aid to create opportunity for all family members to have space for action.

As a part of considering how as a community we might work towards creating greater accountability for men who use violence, there has been increased debate about how we can build services that support women and children remaining in the family home, instead removing the person whose behaviour has put the family at risk. This idea of trying to create different pathways for families that are impacted by domestic and family violence is clearly connected with the work of the homelessness sector.

Current service models rely heavily on refuge and transitional housing models for accommodation for women and children, and while there will always be a need for these important services, there may also be occasions where it is more appropriate for the man to be removed from the family home thus allowing his family to maintain some form of normalcy in their lives so that the children can continue to attend the same school, and remain within any current support networks that they may have.

In the ACT this question of how, as a sector, we work with men who use violence more effectively, has led to the funding of programs such as the *Room4Change* program at the Domestic Violence Crisis Service. The *Room4Change* program has four

main components, group work, one on one case management, partner support and accommodation. The program has been designed to reflect current optimal standards as set out in the New South Wales 'Towards Safe Families'.¹

As such, *Room4Change* engages men over roughly a nine to 12-month period, with engagement length varying dependent on a man's engagement and support needs as well as risk and safety considerations for the women and children impacted by his violence. The current group work components include; group readiness sessions that aim to provide a safe and inviting environment for men to begin to explore various themes about domestic and family violence such as 'what is anger vs abuse' and 'what does taking/not taking responsibility look like'; a 20-week narrative and invitational based men's behavior change group called '*Let's Talk Respect*' that occurs weekly for two hours; and lastly, there is a 17-week '*Caring Dads*' group that is focused on the impact of violence, abuse and neglect on children. In addition to the group work, *Room4Change* practitioners have one-on-one case management sessions with the men focused on his journey through men's behaviour change.

This component is important as it allows an opportunity to address and give space to the man's own experiences of trauma such as his own upbringing or other co-occurring wellbeing issues such as his use of alcohol and/or other drugs. The third component, partner support, is crucial to the issue of safety involved in doing this work. Without contact with the people most impacted by a man's use of violence and abuse, it is impossible to determine if change has occurred, or to manage risk. This work may, from

the outside, present as if the focus is on men. However, in reality, this work needs to be focused on the safety of women and children. When that focus is lost we run the risk of colluding with the person using violence and we lose the opportunity to effect real change.

Within *Room4Change* partner support is offered to all current partners of the men in the program as well as any ex-partners with whom he may have had children. Often partner support is also extended to other family members such as the man's parents if they have also been impacted by his use of violence.

As mentioned above, the fourth, and unique element of the *Room4Change* program is the residential accommodation provided. Not all of the men who take part in *Room4Change* will be accommodated by the program. However, for some men this option has provided a number of benefits. Having accommodation as a part of a men's behavior change program, is a relatively rare occurrence, with only a handful of programs nationally utilising this model, and where it is used, it is done very differently.

Room4Change currently has the capacity to house 11 men in five detached houses. Four of these are co-located in one complex with an office and group room space on site. This configuration allows for the men to engage with *Room4Change* practitioners as needed, but also helps to facilitate attendance at group and one-on-one sessions.

The primary purpose of the accommodation is to assist to enhance the safety of those impacted by the man's use of violence. Due to this, the men's behavior change is the key focus

of the engagement, and the accommodation is utilised as a safety tool. As this concept is relatively new in the men's behavior change space, it is hoped that the two-year external evaluation of *Room4Change* that is currently taking place will add to the literature base in terms of men's behavior change intervention models.

To date the accommodation has been used in a number of ways and flexibility of use has become paramount for its success. Many of the men who stay at the *Room4Change* accommodation have been excluded from the family home through a Family Violence Order or through Parole conditions. Ordinarily it would not be uncommon for the person impacted by the violence to leave the family home. While in some circumstances this will still be required to maximise safety, in other situations it may be appropriate for the man using violence to leave the home.

Often when men are excluded from the family home there is a risk of them also stopping or reducing any maintenance costs that they may be contributing to the family such as mortgage and rental repayments, in an effort to continue to exert power and control. It can in some situations, also be financially stressful or untenable for the man to pay current maintenance costs while also paying rent for himself elsewhere. It is not uncommon for men moving into the *Room4Change* accommodation (where they have been excluded from the family home), to have previously been couch surfing, staying in share houses, or accessing other homelessness services in Canberra that house single men.

The *Room4Change* accommodation aids in providing him with safe, stable and affordable accommodation while he is in the program that enables engagement and assists in facilitating him to maintain maintenance payments as needed. The one on one case management sessions can be utilised to support in transitioning men out of the accommodation, with the aim of supporting men to access private rental or public housing rather than re-entering into the homelessness sector.



The Trios Bond by Hans Lyons

In practice, due to the length of the *Room4Change* program men often dip in and out of the accommodation as it is needed and while some men may not have other options, there are a number of men who voluntarily utilise the accommodation as a part of their de-escalation strategy or as a way of creating space for their partner. Initially the focus on men entering the accommodation was that the residences would be the men's primary address however as the program has grown this concept has become more fluid.

Early anecdotal feedback from partners suggests that the *Room4Change* accommodation is valued in providing an alternative accommodation option for the men to use when they are feeling escalated. Likewise, men have commented that the accommodation has supported them to engage in the men's behavior change work as it has provided a space to 'stop' and consider in a supportive environment the changes that they hope to work towards.

Going into 2019, *Room4Change* is looking to re-imagine the previously run 'Dad's Place', a property where men in the program can have contact with their children (where it is safe and appropriate to do

so). Elements such as Dad's Place and Caring Dads assist in keeping the focus of the men's behavior change work on the safety and wellbeing of those impacted most.

Room4Change signifies an important step for the Domestic Violence Crisis Service in providing an opportunity for change for men in the ACT who are wanting assistance in creating respectful and safe relationships, while also supporting and upholding the rights of women and children to be safe within their own homes and families.

The external evaluation currently taking place through the Australian National University will provide future guidance to the program and service in regards to how best to utilise the accommodation and other program components to maximize safety and to support change. Continuing to reflect on how to do this as well as remaining curious and open to new and innovative approaches is imperative for the growth and development of men's behavior change work in Australia.

Endnote

1. New South Wales Government Attorney General and Justice 2012, Towards Safe Families, A Practice Guide for Men's Domestic Violence Behaviour Change Programs, New South Wales Government Attorney General and Justice, Sydney.

Chapter 5: Clients, Consumers and Lived Experience

Sailom's Story*

(written by Family Case Manager)

YWCA Canberra has a diverse client base across our housing support services. This story highlights the unique experience of a migrant woman, who with the assistance of a YWCA Canberra Family Case Manager, navigated the web of legal, government, community and child care services available to her as she tried to establish a new life.

Assisting clients who are recent migrants often intersects across the community and connecting to these services can be difficult if you do not know where to start. This case study demonstrates the importance of client autonomy and building familiarity with community services and local networks.

We have changed the name of our client to protect their identity.

Sailom first came to Australia on a spousal visa and, in 2015, because she and her husband were at risk of homelessness, they moved into a YWCA Canberra transitional housing property. Sailom was pregnant with her first child at this time and while in this accommodation, it became apparent that she was being subjected to significant psychological and economic abuse from her husband.

Sailom was the main income earner in the home, however this was an arrangement where she felt she was 'forced to work' two jobs up until she was eight months pregnant. She then returned to work immediately after the birth of her first child. Upon returning home from work each day, it was then Sailom's responsibility to manage

all the house work and child care. Her partner would often abuse her, yelling in her face, throwing objects at her while she was holding her infant child. Despite her role in the family as the primary breadwinner, her earnings were largely inaccessible to her and were used to pay for her partner's pre-existing debts.

The abuse continued as her partner refused to move out and Sailom was becoming more and more fearful for her safety. Consequently, in 2016, the YWCA Canberra offered Sailom alternative crisis accommodation and moved her and her infant into another transitional property where they were safe from harm. YWCA Canberra also referred her to Companion House and the Women's Legal Centre where she obtained legal advice about her family situation and her immigration status. With this assistance, she was eventually successful in obtaining a permanent visa to live in Australia. Sailom was also referred to Domestic Violence Crisis Service (DVCS) who assisted her in obtaining a protection order in the ACT Magistrates Court against her ex-partner. We also connected her to Legal Aid ACT, who provided her with legal advice and representation.

Sailom's mother came to visit her for a few months and was a source of comfort to her, assisting in the care of her child which enabled her to maintain her retail employment. During this period, her YWCA Canberra Family Case Manager also worked with her to put some other local support networks in place.

It was clear that Sailom and her child needed more permanent housing however and YWCA Canberra assisted her in applying for a property through Housing ACT. After her mother returned home,



Rainbow... by Emerald Sims

she began to feel very vulnerable and concerned about her ability to balance her care for her child and work, particularly on weekends.

It was critical that Sailom expand her support network and YWCA Canberra continued to work with her in this area. Her family case manager also encouraged her to negotiate her hours with her employer and explore alternative child care options that were better suited to her needs. In this instance, a Family Day Care worker was able to provide care after hours and on weekends. Eventually, Sailom successfully negotiated flexible working hours with her employer, however it required her to give up some of her weekend work, which was a substantial part of her income due to the penalty rates she received.

In discussing future career options with her case worker, Sailom expressed an interest in studying childcare as it would allow her to maintain an appropriate work

life balance. After being guided through the application process, Sailom successfully applied to complete a Certificate 3 in childcare via a scholarship (Skills Capital) and has since completed her skills capacity test.

On top of assisting her in developing the confidence to identify a pathway to a new career, YWCA Canberra also helped Sailom secure 12-weeks free childcare via the ACT Community Services Directorate. Her current childcare provider was also able to arrange additional free childcare hours via the Centrelink child welfare program. This support has meant Sailom could afford the afterhours childcare she required when working. Our work in exploring natural support networks that she could draw upon also meant Sailom was able to negotiate with a friend to share childcare responsibilities — where they care for each other's child one day a week allowing them to work without the added cost of childcare.

As part of ongoing management of her case, YWCA Canberra also referred Sailom to the Centrelink Immigration Outreach Worker. It was discovered that Sailom had not been receiving the full entitlement of Family Tax benefit. With advocacy from the YWCA Canberra Family Case Manager, a temporary exception (with payment and health care card) was immediately provided while she applied for the correct Family Tax Benefit through the Centrelink Social Worker.

Through this correction, Sailom received significant back pay which placed her in a more secure financial situation with the resources and networks to manage her work and family and enabled the YWCA Canberra to assist Sailom in make a 'priority needs' application with ACT Housing. Sailom and her Family Case Manager now hope to secure long term, safe and affordable accommodation for herself and her child in the very near future.

Interview with an Old Boy*

Hey Old Man take a look at my life I'm a lot like...I mean tell us what it was like back in the day. You been round for a long time.

That's true I been around for a long, long, long time. Maybe longer.

What was it like back then? Back in the early '90s. Tell us about the Old Civic Youth Centre and all the crazy-cats at the Foundry and Shortcuts and the Old Griffin Centre?

Back when it was easier to get an ACT Housing flat for a youngster and harder to get kicked off Centrelink? Golly maybe it wasn't even called Centrelink back then. All those wild booming band nights at the old Youth Centre maybe has frazzled my memory. Yes sir, it was easier to get a flat through ACT Housing but it didn't come with much support. I remember early mornings trying to beat the queue to a young man's door on pay day to make sure the

first thing he paid was his rent. Paying your rent by direct debit didn't work quite as well back in them days.

What no-one helped with furniture or any of that stuff?

Wasn't that easy to access back then. But old Shortcuts got a van. Started helping the youngsters on the move. Help get them furniture. Keep an eye on them. Why sometimes a youngster would get a flat and we wouldn't see them for six months and by the time we did catch up they'd found out the hard way that living independently isn't all unicorns and skittles.

So all the old youth workers, but they were slightly younger back then, got together and asked the ACT Housing Old Boys and Girls for whole lot of flats that they could head-lease and lease out to youngsters who needed their own place. These places would come with support and furniture and hopefully the youngsters going

out on their own for the first time would have room to make mistakes. And maybe these mistakes or the unavoidable pitfalls could be limited or watered down or cushioned while the youngster grew and developed.

How'd that go Old Timer?

Well I like to think it went quite well for a good many of those youngsters. Worked for some but not all. But I guess you'll have to ask them. What we do know though is that having your own place is a fundamental, must have, starting point. Thing is that not everyone knows everything and some things have got to be experienced first-hand to know what you don't know.

What?

That's what I'm talking about.

* Facilitated through Canberra Youth Residential Service

Housing Insecurity: The Lived Experience of the LGBTIQ+ Community

Megan Jackson, Secretary, Diversity ACT Community Services*

One of the best ways to learn about housing insecurity is to talk to people who have been homeless. So, let's do that by chatting with K. K is a 52-year-old trans woman who has lived in the ACT for just over two years. For over 12 months of that time, she has experienced homelessness and housing insecurity.

M: When did you first start having issues with housing?

K: It began just as winter started last year. I had been living in a share house with another trans woman, then we moved to another share house, where we each sublet a room from another person. Our names weren't on the lease. The person whose name was on the lease decided that she didn't like me and gave me 24 hours' notice to remove myself, my puppy and all my property from the premises.

M: What happened then?

K: With that much notice, I ended up sleeping in my car. I remember those nights clearly. It was so stressful to try and find a safe place to be, in the middle of winter. The nights were hitting minus eight. And when you sleep in a car you have to leave one of the windows open or otherwise you can't breathe. It's just too enclosed. I was so worried about the puppy — he was only four or five months old. And I was worried about my own safety. And it was bitterly cold.

M: What was going on with work?

K: I had to take time off work — I couldn't bring the dog in to work with me and I had to find some accommodation.

M: And what happened next?

K: After about five days a friend of a friend offered me and the dog a space on her sofa bed. I was so grateful to be out of the cold, sleeping inside, sleeping safely. Being able to sleep behind a locked door and knowing that nobody could get in. And the house had a dog door, so the dog could toilet during the night. But this couldn't be a long-term solution — this person who became my friend had two dogs of her own in a small townhouse. I was sleeping on the sofa bed in the spare room. While I was staying there, I applied to ACT Housing for priority assistance.

M: And then?

K: Another friend of a friend — this time a friend of the person whose sofa bed I was sleeping on. And this time there was a room and I could bring in some of my property. Sleeping on my own bed — bliss! It's amazing how having space for your own belongings improves your wellbeing. There was space for some of my clothes and jewellery and my computer, and the people I was living with became my friends. While I was living there, I had an interview with OneLink — the housing support people in the ACT Government. He took certified copies of my paperwork and my application form.

M: So how long did you stay there?

K: I stayed in this house until early September, when I moved to Adelaide to start a new relationship. Unfortunately, that relationship didn't work out and so I was back to my friend's spare room in Canberra at the end of October until early December. I had to move again in December because my friend's

daughter needed to move home. I moved to Aranda in December, but again my name wasn't on the lease. Things went pear shaped again, and I was sleeping in the lounge room in a household of three adults, and up to four children.

M: And now?

K: I signed the lease for my current share house at the start of August and moved in there straight away.

M: For the first time in over two years, you are living in a house where your name is on the lease?

K: Yes.

M: And what about ACT Housing?

K: I have never had an offer of housing from ACT Housing. OneLink lost my application, and I spent heaps of time on the phone trying to sort things out, but never had a result.

M: What about a women's refuge?

K: None of the women's refuges were able to provide any accommodation. They either couldn't house the dog, or there was the time when one person at a women's refuge told me that I had to go to a men's refuge. And that's hardly a safe option, even if they would take the dog, which they won't.

M: When you add it all up, what has your experience of homelessness and housing insecurity been like?

K: Mostly scary — physically, mentally and emotionally. Just talking about it now has made me tear up. It's a truly horrible experience.

I've never had this type of experience before. Before



And it feels like Home 2 by Novie

transitioning, I owned houses, both here and in the United Kingdom. I think that the process of transitioning increased the risk of housing insecurity for me — I went from secure housing with my wife and family to being reliant on other people's good will for somewhere to live. My identity, my self-worth, they are all tied up in the security thing. Before I transitioned I never thought about housing insecurity — there were two of us, we always had income, we could always pay our bills. But then I lost all of that, and eventually reached the point when I was sleeping in my car.

People need to understand how traumatic this is. Homelessness and housing insecurity aren't just about people sleeping in parks. I was working full-time in aged care and sleeping in my car because there were no emergency housing opportunities available to a trans woman with a dog. Animals are important components of people's identity, and stability and mental health. My dog kept me from committing suicide because he needed me. He was reliant on me. Things need to change in the way that our society deals with pets and homeless people.

Given K's experience, perhaps there are some changes that need to be made to the way that responses to homelessness and housing security deal with the unique experiences of people in the LGBTIQ+ community.

Diversity ACT is keen to work with any agencies and organisations that provide emergency and social housing to ensure that no one else in the LGBTIQ+ community experiences the kind of trauma that K went through. Surely, we can do better!

* This article first appeared in the *ACTCOSS Update Journal*, Issue 85, Spring 2018

Reimagine — My experience with Youth Homelessness*

Being a 14 to 16-year old boy on the streets looking for a place to stay is rather frightening and rather discerning for the child, their friends and their family. Homelessness comes with an association with crime, drugs and a horrid reputation. A lack of food and a lack of clothing can really be the largest variable when it comes to staying safe and comfortable in a whole world of hell on the streets.

My first experience with homelessness on the streets was when I was 14. Endless arguments and endless infighting with friends and family had caused me to be kicked out of home. With a certain risk to my own health I would end

up sleeping at friends or sleeping on the streets. Cold and with nowhere to go, I'd turn to drugs and alcohol to deal with and enjoy my times out on the streets.

At 15 I learned that the best place to turn to was my friends, I'd smoke weed, get drunk, steal food, clothes, nearly everything I needed was either supplied by friends or stolen from stores. I was a raging alcoholic by 16! Hoorah for drugs and alcohol, though my time was spent doing illegitimate and illegal things, I very quickly learned that my actions and the actions of others around me had consequences. I was detained and arrested over four to five times by the age of 16.

The winter was the toughest. No clothes to keep me warm, and no blankets unless I was lucky. I grew to accept that life really wasn't cut out to be anything but work and pleasure, though I never really focused on work, and only really focused on the pleasure. Even friends had started to turn their backs on me. A lost soul and a lost boy had found warmth in drugs and pain, hoorah!

I also grew with a lack of honesty, a lack of caring and a lack of respect for authority, my elders and even my friends at times; I was never a very good liar though.

Regarding youth homelessness, there are some really helpful foundations out there for people of all ages, whether they be younger or older. Yet I really do wish that more help could be given to those that are older and are having trouble finding a place to sleep. I see too many people misled by drugs and it seems even the law doesn't offer aid to those who really do truly need help. I find a lack of sympathy from those with more money and resources than those who have less and are finding it hard to live a decent, well thought out life.

People more prone to homelessness won't even have the support of loved ones, friends, family, etc.

Thanks to all those people who have offered me aid in my times of need and also thanks to all the people who are still offering aid to others on the streets.

Kind regards. A young homeless orphan.

* Facilitated through Canberra Youth Residential Service



When In Time by Village Folk (Ainslie Village)

In Their Own Words

David's Story

Settling In*

David, his wife, Louise, and their child have spent the last five years struggling to find accommodation. Both adults survive on disability support pensions, and come from difficult backgrounds.

After being abandoned by his parents, David was cared for by his grandfather, but after he died David was on his own. Louise's father had a substance abuse problem, and her mother also has a disability requiring care. Without family support, and unable to find work, David and Louise had limited options for affordable housing.

They've lived in caravan parks — sometimes without power — and small, cheap motel rooms while continually trying to find either private rental properties, or affordable housing through the Government.

Louise was seeking assistance to prioritise their case for affordable housing, and OneLink referred them to St Vincent de Paul Society's (Vinnies) Family and Youth Homelessness Services team. The team visited the family, and also referred them to members of the local St Vincent de Paul Society Conference who visited the family in their motel room to provide emergency material and funding aid with which they could buy food items or toiletries.

The motel room was tiny and didn't have any cooking facilities; there was no easy access to public transport, and the family didn't have a car. David and Louise's three-year old daughter couldn't play outside due to heavy

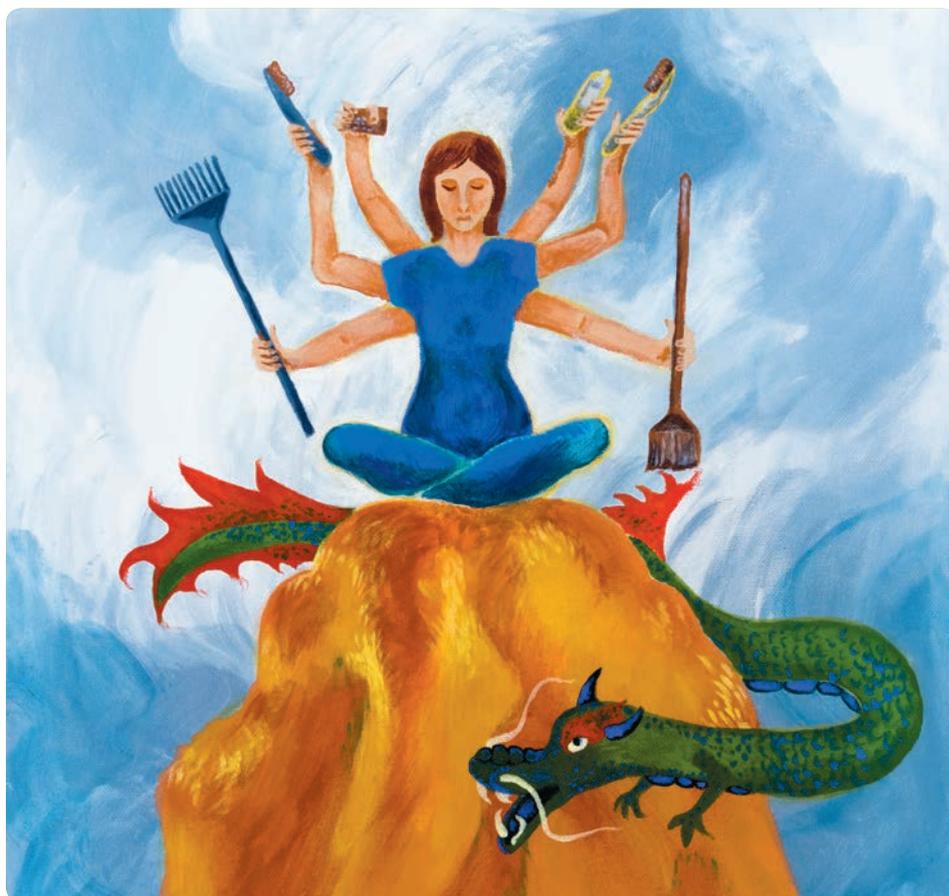
traffic around the motel, as well as roadworks and a concern for snakes. Additionally, the motel's clientele were mainly men with no other children. They were isolated in an environment unsuitable as any long term solution, especially for a child.

Vinnies supported them to secure government funding for day care for their daughter, who now attends two days a week, ensuring she receives essential education and socialising skills. Additionally, the family have now moved into one of the properties St Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/

Goulburn manage as part of their transitional housing program.

With stable accommodation assured the family can now concentrate on improving other parts of their lives, with the first priority getting all their documents together for Housing ACT in to progress their application for a long-term housing solution. Vinnies have also provided links to community engagement opportunities in order for the family to widen their social inclusion.

**Facilitated through SVDP Canberra/Goulburn*



Rental Goddess by Kelly Houston

Violet's Story

Violet and her mother are housing clients in YWCA Canberra's transitional housing program. In recent years YWCA Canberra has provided valuable assistance to Violet, providing her with both housing support and also advice on local support networks that she can draw upon as she goes through her gender transition. We invited Violet to share her story through a creative piece. This story chronicles her early life and her ongoing transition and acceptance.

My Story

My name is Violet.

Ever since I was born I have known I was a woman.

No matter what other people said.

I grew up enjoying toys that have been traditionally associated with girls such as princesses and fairy wings. But my father had other ideas. He was disgusted by what I was, but believed it was fixable.

He spent my childhood trying to change who I fundamentally was. He did not just want me to be his son but someone who embodied his twisted view of the world. I was supposed to be exactly like him and he would not accept anything else. I wanted to be kind to all other kids and have friends that made me happy, but his vision of me was a bully. Someone who was only friends with boys and would treat girls as an object. He would teach me hate and violence when I was child. His message was that I was fortunate because I was

born a boy because he believed men were better than women.

His techniques, or 'lessons' as he called them, to shape me into his twisted image continue to scar me. They would be as simple as using physical violence for pure cruelty reasons. In his mind men were supposed to kill and hurt. Animals were an easy target for us. I never wanted to hurt them, but he would punish me if I refused. I watched fish burn to death in the sun and killed animals with my arms. Those of a child. He would try to get me to start fights with other kids. But I would refuse so he would punish and teach me more. He tried to change who I was and perhaps in a way he succeeded. But he could never change me the way he wanted to. He could not change who I was.

Eventually I was able to escape him, but I was too afraid to tell my mum who I truly was, so I hid. I was miserable hiding, but it was the only thing I could do because I was sick. Or so I believed. I was unable to hide well because people already sensed that I was not straight. I denied the rumours endlessly and it was painful to keep denying who I was to so many people. All I wanted was to tell my friends and those who I admired the person I really was, but I could not because I was afraid that they would no longer accept me. I had hidden how I felt for years why could I not hide who I was for longer? I thought it would get easier. That I could build a new self if I tried hard enough. But I could not, I don't know why I thought

I could hide myself; if my father's teachings could not change who I was how was simple denial supposed to?

I would move again to where I am now and in doing so, I finally admitted to myself that I could not live an impersonation forever. I told my mum and I prepared for the worst. But I was wrong. She accepted me. I was ecstatic, for the first time in my life someone not only loved me for who I was, but I could be free to tell them about the real me. I quickly went to see doctors and was prescribed medicine to help me transition. Its effects were slow at first but over time my body changed in ways that just felt natural. I had never been happy with how I looked but for the first time I could look in a mirror without feeling repulsed by what I saw. I could for the first time in my life feel good about myself for something. I came out to my friends and they also had no judgements of me. I finally felt like I belonged to a group I could call friends.

Today it is still a struggle to be happy with who I am, and I continue to live with long lasting effects from my trauma. But I could not go on living as I was living before. I was not real before. Now that the real me is living I can begin to grow as a person and begin the healing process. My hope is that one day I will be comfortable with my identity, body and life. That I will be able to enjoy my future despite the pain of the past. That I can undo the damage done to me and find my real self.

Maree's Story

Homelessness among single, older women is increasing. Maree's path into homelessness was explored in YWCA Canberra's mini-documentary Hidden Women which was launched during this year's National Homelessness Week. Today, Maree lives in one of our group houses where she has found lasting friendships and a network of women who support each other. She wants to see group housing explored as an innovative and viable housing solution.

Her

If it happened to her she would have enough financial back up to get herself out of it.

If it happened to her she would be able to turn to her family for support.

If it happened to her she would get government housing.

If it happened to her she would be taken in by someone.

If it happened to her surely someone would be listening.

I wish that I was her.

But it happened to me and I found out that support is so hard to ask for and even harder to receive. Homelessness has been the hardest thing in my life to deal with and I have

dealt with a lot. I've raised a family, run my own business and dealt with the major trauma of losing a child to AIDS and through it all I retained the sense of self and the strength of will to get through everything that had been thrown at me.

Then came homelessness.

It didn't happen quickly, it was kind of like drowning slowly knowing it was happening and having no control over the events. My marriage had fallen apart many years before and I raised my children as a single mother. My two boys had grown up and moved out and the strength I had found in that supportive role was gone. I had started dating and things seemed to be going well for a while when my partner suggested I move in with him to better our financial situation. Not long after moving in however, the job which I had with a cleaning company for four-years fell through and I was suddenly unemployed. This put huge pressure on the relationship where I suddenly felt like a burden and not part of a partnership. The relationship began to erode and turn toxic, and everything turned to quicksand under my feet. I started to experience my first bout of suicidal thoughts and I didn't have the finances to privately rent my own accommodation.

Panicked thinking makes for poor decisions. With what money I had, I placed my things in storage and went to a friend's house. I was couch surfing for weeks while trying to get help. As I had moved from regional New South Wales to Canberra I was informed that I would need to be in Canberra for six months before I could apply for government housing and thereafter it would possibly be another seven years on a waiting list. It was more than I could get my head around. My friend had no idea that things were going to take this long. The words ate away at what pitiful amount of self-esteem I had left. Attempts at contacting emergency housing were difficult as, even though I was literally sleeping on someone's couch, it was considered a place to stay.

When I was finally accepted into a refuge, I was told I could only take two bags as they didn't provide storage. The refuge was staffed Monday to Friday and the days when the staff were not there it was like the inmates

running the asylum. Bans on drugs and alcohol were not adhered to and I'd have to bring my own paper to the bathroom as the toilet paper provided was being continually stolen. I found it was just safer to isolate myself. It was these times, sitting in the supplied room at the refuge, that I would have time to contemplate the events that had transpired and wondered how things had gotten this bad.

I started to accept that this situation had no blame, just bucketloads of self-esteem eating stresses.

Eventually, I submitted an income and assets test application for housing at the YWCA Canberra which provides safe shared accommodation for single older women. I went for my first walk through of a group house called Betty Searle with nine bedrooms each with an ensuite, three living rooms and two kitchens plus numerous sun pockets with outdoor seating. The sense of space and peace was overwhelming. I wasn't the only applicant of course and I held my breath, knowing that this was a life raft offered to only a few.

I now proudly state this has been my home for three years and I have since been able to pick up work in the disabilities industry. I often pinch myself to realise I'm not only doing ok but I'm stronger and more powerful than ever. I have learned there is no embarrassment that I cannot face for a good cause and if you're able to help by relaying this story to people in power — it is time for change. The options in government housing do not cover this style of accommodation and while the model may not work for everyone, we are all different and we all need different options. I've found that it's been wonderful to have people around to give me support and I'm happy to support my house mates who I look on as family. We are women supporting women.

I would like to gift my story to all the hers out there who may not have all the options that she should. May my voice bring change to your situations. You would never know if you saw her crossing the street, she looks just like anyone else but that lovely elderly lady that smiled at you may not have anywhere safe to sleep tonight.

What is a home?*

The streets are hostile —

Friends turn their backs —

The ill-minded find comfort in it though

One person's trash is another's treasure —

How many times did I sleep in those bushes —

How often did I lose my way —

How many times did I do wrong —

Have I found Home?

No longer sleeping awake —

Now my dinner isn't scraps —

What is a home?

They say it's where the heart is —

They say it's where you feel safe —

They say a lot —

Maybe I found home.

Maybe I'm Home

Finally

* Facilitated through Canberra Youth Residential Service

Susan Helyar

Director, ACTCOSS



Responding to Homelessness in the ACT: Reorienting the failing housing market vital to reducing homelessness in Canberra

The growth of homelessness in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), some of which is visible and captured in the data, some of which is hidden from view and not evident in the official statistics, is a blight all ACTCOSS members want to see removed. ACTCOSS has taken the view that to reduce homelessness this city needs to fix the housing market alongside ensuring specialist support and settings are in place for people who are homeless.

After five years of collective advocacy by people and organisations (private and community sector) all across Canberra, in October 2018 the ACT Government announced an ACT Housing Strategy. This Strategy includes a significant focus on

increasing public housing, growing supply of affordable and accessible housing, improving rights of tenants, security of tenure and responses for people who do not have a home. ACTCOSS had encouraged the ACT Government to be ambitious and to match that ambition with a Housing Strategy that was comprehensive, brave and responsive. This Housing Strategy delivers on our key asks.

When announcing the ACT Housing Strategy both the Chief Minister and Deputy Chief Minister noted that improving access to housing was a way to reduce inequality in our city. Community advocates had framed our campaign for more investment in affordable housing and reducing homelessness as the most important actions that could be taken to reduce inequality in our city:

*'the lack of affordable rental housing is the single biggest problem in the social and economic life of this city. It has the deepest impact on the greatest number of people and it is underpinning many areas of anxiety, poverty, misery and crisis in the lives of low income people in our city. There is a social, moral and economic imperative to act.'*¹

Income and wealth inequality data tell a disturbing story.² Over the past four-years income inequality has remained steady, with the highest income quintile gaining six times the income of the lowest income quintile. Wealth inequality has grown, with the highest wealth households holding around 200 times the wealth of households in the lowest wealth quintile.

This inequality is caused, exacerbated and entrenched by inequality in the housing market. This inequality is driving deprivation,

exclusion and intergenerational transfer of inequality, all of which compromise our prosperity, inclusiveness and sustainability.

If a household can gather together a deposit to purchase a house, and secure a loan to become a home owner, then they can start to build their wealth through housing as an asset. This pathway to financial security has been the foundation of the social compact between people and market in Australia for past generations. Our minimum wage setting processes, income support system and retirement incomes policy were all founded on the assumption that most people would be living in a home that they owned or were on the way to owning, and in retirement would have paid off their home that could be handed on as an asset to their family when they no longer needed to live there.

Over the past two decades this social compact has broken, with housing investors displacing home owners, and the proportion of renters growing, especially for people who are under 45 years old and for older people who are entering the housing market later in life. The preferential tax treatment of housing via negative gearing and capital gains tax exemptions has privileged investors over owner occupiers and renters, and diverted investment from other parts of the economy into the housing market.

This shift has led our community into a wicked dilemma, especially in the ACT: our foundation for wealth and job creation is reliant on an overinflated housing market that is failing a growing proportion of the population. Any substantial change in the operation of this market will have an impact on existing beneficiaries and the transition to a



Untitled by Bess Kenway

market that actually delivers for the whole population will be bumpy and slow. Community organisations, from housing assistance providers through to employment support services, financial counsellors, legal assistance services, emergency relief providers and family and relationship services will all need to step up to support people through a major change in our drivers of economic activity.

But it will be worth it. Our members have told us:

'Finding an affordable, accessible safe and secure home is the cornerstone for a connected and contributing life. It provides a foundation from which to participate both

*economically and socially in the life of our city. It is also a critical social determinant of physical health and social and emotional wellbeing.'*³

None of this is to pretend that other drivers of homelessness are not important to attend to: exposure to violence and unresolved trauma, mental health problems, substance use and misuse, legal challenges. But without the right supply settings for affordable housing there is not a pathway out of specialist support systems into long-term accommodation.

That is why the ACT Council of Social Service has applauded the ACT Housing Strategy. The investments

and reforms included in the Strategy will strengthen the mixed private/community/public housing market that is needed to ensure everyone has a home they can call their own, that is affordable, accessible, safe and offers security of tenure.

Endnotes

1. <https://www.actcoss.org.au/publications/advocacy-publications/position-statement-act-affordable-housing-strategy>
2. <https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Inequality-in-Australia-2018.pdf> and https://acoss.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Inequality_in_Australia_FINAL.pdf
3. <https://www.actcoss.org.au/publications/advocacy-publications/submission-towards-new-housing-strategy-act-community>

Kate Cvetanovski

Executive Director, Northside ACT



Spare a Thought for the Frontline

At Northside and in organisations across the country, our frontline teams are engaged in waging a war to end people's experience of homelessness. However, more often than not it resembles a war of attrition where both sides in the conflict end up as casualties.

Unfortunately, the capacity of our workers to wage this war successfully is impeded by the requirements and imperatives of a service system that operates to further marginalise and exclude, rather than embrace and support those in most need of assistance. All too often, so-called 'complex' individuals are excluded because they do not fit the workings of the system.

As a result, our frontline teams become collateral damage and experience the vicarious trauma that comes from fighting so relentlessly. This applies not only to teams of specialist homelessness services workers, but also to those in nearly every community organisation working with people who do not fit

neatly into systems dominated by considerations of the 'cost per unit' or the dictates of a National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) price list.

Analysis completed by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare highlights that in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), compared to national figures, only 53 per cent of those people who were experiencing homelessness when they entered a service were assisted into housing when they left.¹ On the ground this means that all the work our teams are putting into providing support during a period of support still didn't eventuate in a permanent housing solution for one in two people they engaged.

They are not a sales workforce, they are a human service workforce and we are setting them up to fail if we think such a hit rate is acceptable.

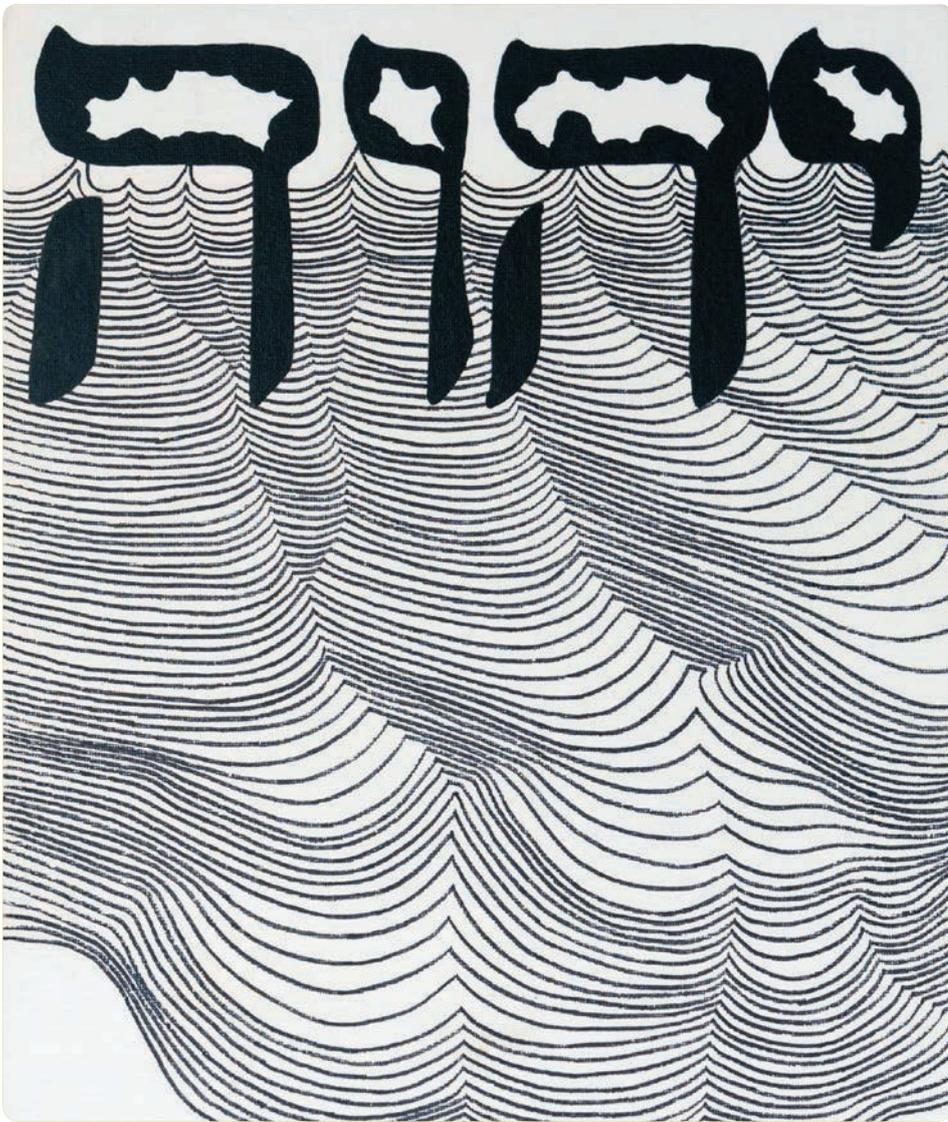
On the 2016 Census night 54 members of Canberra's community slept rough on our streets. This is almost double the previous count.² However, even with such a number, we should easily be able to access safe, permanent and affordable housing for them in a city of the size of Canberra. At the same time there are at least 1550³ people experiencing the more hidden types of homelessness, that is, living in supportive housing and shelters. All those working in the homelessness sector know that these options are constantly at capacity and that public housing offers little in the way of relief as the number public housing households in the ACT is currently at an all-time low of 6.1 per cent⁴ However, with the recent release of the ACT Housing Strategy this is set to slightly increase over the next ten years.

In addition, a growing number of people are at risk of homelessness

as a direct result of having support withdrawn or denied by package systems like My Age Care and the NDIS. Proving your eligibility for specialist support through the NDIS or the My Age Care system is currently extremely problematic, and as it stands, there is no funding provided for building the rapport and the relationship that is often required to access both these service systems.

As you can imagine, very few people who have a lived experience of homelessness come to support workers with their medical and other necessary history neatly tucked in a bag. The Northside frontline teams, and similar service providers, often have to work through the complex applications, step by step with the client, to prove eligibility for the client to gain the essential support. This can involve at the very least contacting other organisations nationally to obtain dates, details and verification needed for the application and at the most commencing on a long and deficit focused path of obtaining a formal diagnosis. This is extra time consuming work over and above the heavy lifting of the team's foremost aim to source and secure safe, permanent and affordable housing for the client

The Northside team, just like other homelessness services across Australia, is wearing the cost and at times, the blame for the lack of available and affordable housing and for a sometimes seemingly inaccessible and difficult to navigate service system. Usually this sort of response comes from people labeled as having 'high and complex needs', who are 'out of scope' of the service system or who have 'undiagnosed' or 'untreated' health and mental health issues. These clients are frequently so sick of receiving everything



My Place by Novy F, 2017

except housing that they lash out at the worker who is trying to support them, because this is the only way they can feel seen and heard in what seems to be an impossible situation.

Despite what would seem to be the insurmountable odds of fee for service requirements and high rents, frontline teams have achieved remarkable results. The ACT saw an 8.2 per cent overall decrease in homelessness between the 2011 Census and the 2016 Census⁵ including a 29 per cent decrease in young people experiencing homelessness.⁶ This demonstrates clearly that at a time when options for housing were slowly disappearing and sustaining an individual's tenancy required a clinical diagnosis, the continuing support and efforts of the teams on the ground were still able to make a considered impact for the people who needed assistance the most.

Everyone will agree that housing ends homelessness, but until the

time housing is actually available, it is those frontline people, working with the limited means and resources available to them, that are the main contributors to ending homelessness in practice for many.

Working with the consequences of poverty and the realities of homelessness is messy. It is always unrelenting work. Unfortunately, the wins are few, and far between.

While fully aware that sustainable change will take time, it is important to acknowledge how our frontline teams are still managing to achieve some incredible outcomes, under difficult circumstances. Their work still makes a significant impact on one of the hardest and most expensive social issues to address – homelessness.

One of the reasons for this might be because the composition of the frontline workforce has changed. This has happened as the result of the move towards greater consumer

directed care and other package/fee for service models. More colleagues from the community-based mental health, community age care and disability sectors have swelled our ranks. They have brought their skills and experience to our homelessness teams to assist our services addressing in particular those who are falling through the gaps in the system.

The homelessness sector is one of the last bastions of the block-funded programs that are the 'catch all' which allows effective and well directed service responses and relationships to be developed with respect and integrity.

After all, that is what it is all about really isn't it? Our work based on the respect and integrity of the relationship between people providing support and people receiving it. I have long been a champion of the Housing First model, but I now have to admit that until such time that we have the houses to put people in, it is the frontline workers first and foremost who are achieving the outcomes that are so desperately needed by so many. My mantra at the moment is 'people end the experience of homelessness not just houses.'

In the end, it really does not matter how shiny or magnificent the 'end homelessness plan' or 'strategy' is – without the right people and resources implementing the plan or strategy at the right time, it will always be at risk of failing. Fortunately, our sector has the talent, the commitment and the courage to do this work – the question is whether they will have the energy left to do this vital work once the plan or strategy is finally handed down.

Endnotes

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4. Productivity Commission, op. cit., Chapter 18 Housing, Productivity Commission, Canberra, 2018, Attachment tables, Table GA.16 Households residing in Public Housing (Per Cent),
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Opinion 3

Kym Duggan

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The St Vincent de Paul Society across Australia is driven to speak out about the need for sufficient housing in our community by the experience of its members and staff who serve people experiencing poverty every day.¹²

The key recommendations of the paper were that:

- the Federal Government should take advantage of the current record low interest rates and establish a \$10 billion Social and Affordable Housing Fund
- all governments formally recognise the human right to housing as a basis for housing policy.³

Homelessness: It is a Breach of Fundamental Human Rights

Homelessness is a critical social justice issue for our community and the St Vincent de Paul Society has long been active in pushing for a Housing First approach, both nationally and here in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). This principle recognises that provision of appropriate housing is the essential platform on which broader responses to a range of complex needs can be built.

As an example, in 2016 the Society released a major policy paper entitled *Ache for Home*¹ calling for a much greater commitment by governments, both state and federal, to resolving this critical issue. The paper states that:

'Housing is a core human right and the foundation every Australian needs for full economic and community participation.

Homelessness in the ACT

The trend in homeless statistics in the ACT is disturbing. There has been a 69 per cent increase in homeless people in the ACT between 2001 and 2016.⁴ For people in overcrowded dwellings there has been a 374 per cent increase in the ACT in that time.⁵

The over 230 per cent increase between 2001 and 2016⁶ in homeless people over 55 years old is something we are also seeing as a trend in St Vincent de Paul home visits and interviews.

In a major research paper for the St Vincent de Paul Society in Queensland entitled, *An Investigation Into Repeat Requests for Charity: Evidence From the St Vincent de Paul Society Queensland, Australia* the authors state that;

'...the costs of housing are a major driver of poverty in Australia. Housing is the highest fixed expenditure for low-income households; of the 2.99 million

Australians living below the poverty line, or 13 per cent of the population, 42 per cent resided in expensive yet insecure private rental housing.

In addition to unaffordable rents driving poverty, the experience of housing insecurity that pervades the lives of low-income private renters perpetuates poverty by subverting people's capacity to benefit from resources like health and education services and mainstream institutions that those of us securely housed take for granted.¹⁷

In the ACT, there are only a handful of properties with rooms to let, and there are no private rental properties affordable for people on Centrelink benefits. There is a small amount of community housing, but for most people on low incomes there is a total reliance on public housing.

As well as those people who are homeless, we note that there are around 35,000 Canberrans living below the poverty line and are at risk of homelessness according to The ACT Council of Social Services (ACTCOSS).⁸

In our view, a significant cause of housing insecurity in Australia and the ACT in particular, has been the Federal Government's failure to properly fund the provision of social and affordable housing. Between 1996 and 2007 the Federal Government ripped \$3 billion out of public housing, and the safety net of public housing was effectively disabled. In 2008, the Rudd government published a White Paper, *The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness*. In the foreword to this paper it said:

'Homelessness is not just the result of too few houses — its causes are many and varied.

Domestic violence, a shortage of affordable housing, unemployment, mental illness, family breakdown and drug and alcohol abuse all contribute to the level of homelessness in Australia.¹⁹

Australia wide there is a shortfall in social and affordable housing of about 270,000 properties. The average waiting time for public housing is three years in the ACT. People who are homeless get priority allocations of housing — as they rightly should — but that then pushes the waiting period out for everyone else. For example, in the ACT you are more likely to get your housing allocation by developing mental illness or other serious illnesses and then getting on the priority list than you are by waiting your turn on the standard list.

Research suggests that when someone becomes homeless there is a small window of opportunity to rehouse them before they start to develop problems with their general health, lack of educational opportunities, social isolation and mental and other health issues. A failure to respond appropriately results in long-term social damage to the homeless person, and an economic cost to the community of two to three times the cost of addressing the problem before these complications develop.¹⁰

In August 2012, the St Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn published a paper *Housing Stress in Canberra Goulburn*¹¹ in which we outlined the work undertaken by the Society in Canberra/Goulburn. The paper gave examples of housing stress drawn from the people we visited in their homes and interviewed in Vinnies Centres. We then asked the federal, New South Wales and ACT governments to take action to address housing stress.

We explained the financial pressures we found. For example, a single parent could expect to pay 74 per cent of their weekly pension

income on rent for a two-bedroom unit while an age pensioner would pay 69 per cent of their pension on a one-bedroom unit.

There was no private rental accommodation affordable (defined as not more than 30 per cent of income) to someone on Centrelink benefits. This meant that people on Centrelink benefits were either totally reliant on public or social housing, or they existed below the poverty line.

Housing as a Human Right

Following on from the recommendation in the *Ache for Home* paper, in October 2016, during the ACT election, the St Vincent de Paul Society Canberra/Goulburn called for an amendment to the ACT's Human Rights Act 2004 to recognise housing as a basic human right.¹² The Act was amended in 2012 to include the right to education as a human right and the ACT Government stated in its election commitments in 2013 that housing should also be considered. However, to date this has not occurred.¹³

The St Vincent de Paul Society strongly supports the concept of Housing First. For us it is a direct consequence of recognising that access to housing is an essential human right.

We have continued to advocate for this amendment to the ACT Human Rights Act and believe that if we can get housing recognised in the ACT as a human right then there is a platform for similar action in other jurisdictions.

I note that the Catholic Bishops Conference in their recently released Social Justice Statement are also calling for recognition of the right to housing as a basic human right.

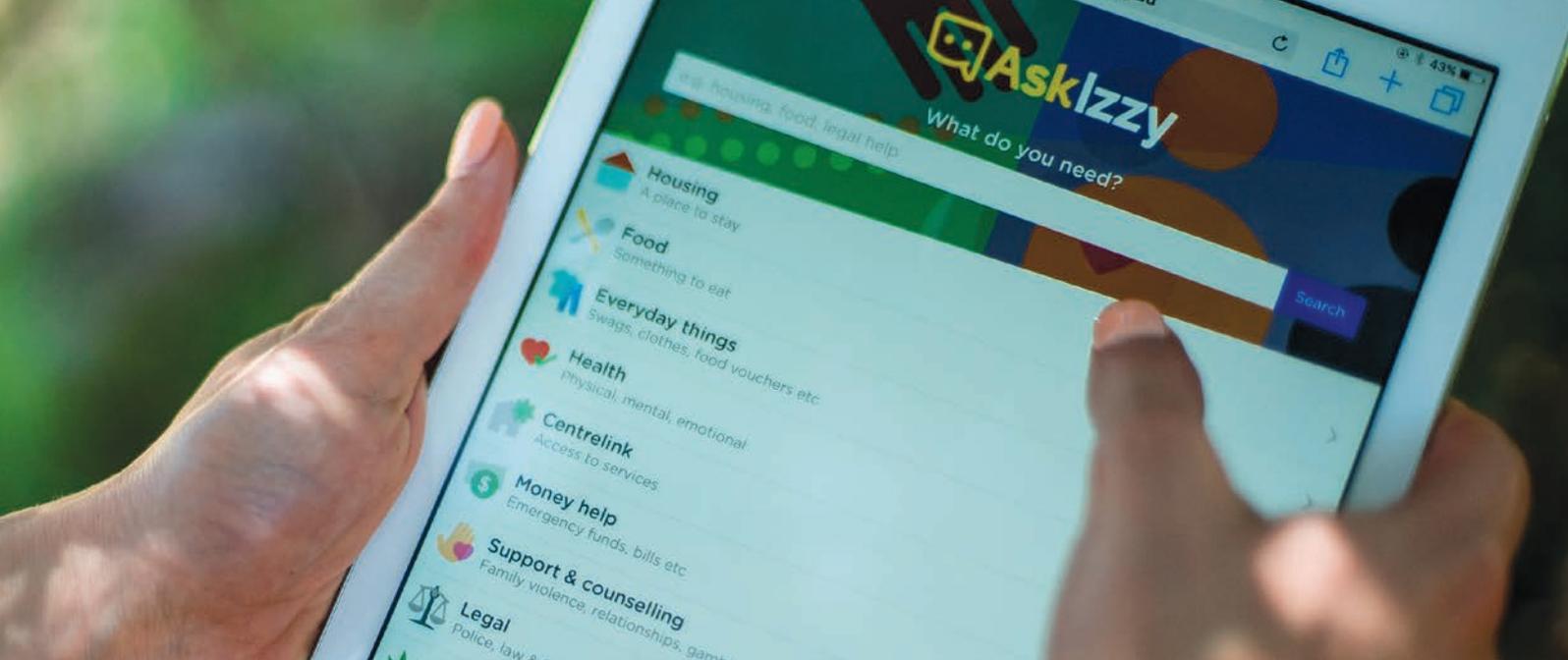
It is time for Australia to reassert the value of housing as a basic human right. A house is not merely an investment whose value is determined by the laws of supply and demand. Houses are built to become homes. We want to find again the ideal we once prized — that housing for all should be seen as an uncontested public good.¹⁴

The Time to Act is Now

The St Vincent de Paul Society is dismayed by the lack of coordinated action that we have seen from governments, both Federal and Territory, particularly in recent years. This is a time when low interest rates and a supportive community give governments a once in a generation opportunity to deal with the scourge of homelessness, once and for all. What we need is the political will to grasp this opportunity.

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1. St Vincent de Paul Society National Council 2016, *Ache for Home, A plan to address chronic homelessness and housing affordability in Australia*, St Vincent de Paul Society National Council, Canberra.
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12. *Right to Housing: A proposal to amend the Human Rights Act 2004 to include the right to adequate housing 2016*, St Vincent de Paul Society, Territory Council, October.
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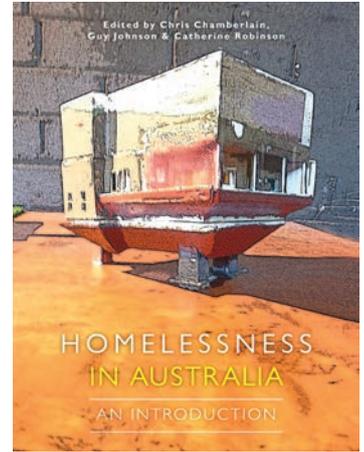
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