

20 October 2023

Now is the time to end Homelessness

Beyond Housing welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Australian Government's National Homelessness and Housing Plan Issues Paper.

We are the main entry point for the homelessness system and provide a range of support for people experiencing homelessness or at risk of becoming homeless. Each year, we see around 6000 people and families needing assistance to secure or maintain their housing. We are also the most significant community housing organisation within Victoria's Goulburn and Ovens Murray regions. We own or manage over 700 properties, including long-term community housing and transitional housing.

We strongly advocate for the adoption of a 'systems perspective' in addressing homelessness across the nation. This is not merely a shift in strategy but a transformation in our collective approach—simply from managing homelessness to proactively eliminating it.

We recommend rolling out a 10-year National Plan committed to specific, measurable outcomes. The Government's goal should be nothing less than a 50% reduction in homelessness within the first five years and its complete eradication by the end of the decade.

We propose built-in review mechanisms every 2-3 years to keep the plan agile and responsive. These reviews will assess the plan's efficacy and allow for any required course corrections. Moreover, we strongly advocate involving individuals who have lived experienced of homelessness in these reviews to provide invaluable firsthand perspectives.

We want to emphasise that prevention is the cornerstone of any effective strategy to eliminate homelessness. By proactively preventing homelessness, we are reducing the strain on existing services and, more importantly, averting the devastating social and personal impacts of losing one's home.

In the challenging environment characterised by a tight private rental market and a significant shortfall in social housing, prevention is not just optimal; it's essential.

Statistics from the 2021-22 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) Specialist Homelessness Services Annual Report show 71,962 unassisted requests for help. That's an average of 288 people per day who could not be assisted, indicating that our existing services are overwhelmed. Therefore, a strategic shift towards prevention can significantly reduce the pressure on these services.

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Universal Prevention

Universal prevention aims to mitigate the risk of homelessness across the entire population by addressing structural issues that can lead to homelessness. The data on why people become homeless can serve as a roadmap for implementing universal prevention strategies:

- **Housing:** Increased social and affordable housing construction and fortified tenancy protections can alleviate housing crises and evictions.
- **Financial Stability:** Ensuring adequate and reliable income support payments and raising minimum wages can forestall financial emergencies that result in homelessness.
- **Family Support:** Programs aimed at reducing gender-based violence and supporting family welfare can decrease the rates of family violence and child abuse, which significantly contribute to homelessness.
- **Social Justice:** Initiatives to combat racism and discrimination will enhance employment, housing, and health prospects for marginalised communities, thereby reducing homelessness.

Targeted Prevention

Based on data such as the AIHW SHS Annual Reports, targeted prevention focuses on groups disproportionately impacted by homelessness. This includes populations like those experiencing domestic violence, young people, and Indigenous communities. The types of support will vary depending on the specific needs of each group.

For those we serve at Beyond Housing, targeted prevention might include personalised case management, skills training, and specialised services for victims of family violence. If you have lived experience of homelessness, reflecting on the support that could have prevented your homelessness six months to two years prior can offer valuable insights.

This form of prevention focuses on specific groups and involves collaboration with other human services systems. For example, youth services and family violence programs can play a vital role in targeted prevention, as can specialised homelessness services.

Crisis Prevention

Crisis prevention focuses on immediate interventions for those on the cusp of homelessness—those who have received an eviction notice, have been asked to leave their family home, or are exiting healthcare or judicial facilities with nowhere to go. Beyond Housing recognises that this form of prevention requires specialised skills and extensive resources.

Here, the focus is on immediate interventions to prevent homelessness. Legal services offering tenancy advice and advocacy are examples of crisis prevention outside specialised homelessness services. Within the system, homelessness services also offer vital crisis prevention support.

While these measures are more reactive, they are crucial in ensuring that the experience of homelessness is brief and non-recurring. Although these fit within our prevention typology, we will discuss these further in the section on responding to homelessness.

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In line with the Canadian Framework for Homelessness Prevention, we advocate for a decisive shift from a crisis-oriented system to one that makes homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring. This would entail greater investment in preventative measures and shared governmental responsibility in averting homelessness.

The AIHW provides valuable data on the primary factors contributing to homelessness, segmented by state and demographic cohorts.

A robust system to end homelessness must be multifaceted, accounting for both universal and targeted prevention methods. The responsibility for this system should not be siloed but shared across various levels of government, and it should be data-driven, leveraging insights from research and real-world evidence to adapt and evolve. We believe Australia can effectively transition from managing homelessness to truly ending it by taking such a comprehensive approach.

The most effective and essential change we can make to end homelessness is preventing people from becoming homeless in the first place.

A multi-dimensional prevention approach integrating universal and targeted strategies is crucial for moving from managing homelessness to ending it. By addressing the structural factors that lead to homelessness and focusing on the specific needs of the most vulnerable groups, we can make significant strides in making homelessness in Australia rare, brief, and non-recurring. This requires collaborative efforts across different levels of government and various service providers, with ongoing monitoring and adaptations based on data and lived experiences.

Capacity strain on Homelessness Services

The rising demand for homelessness services is straining our capacity to provide immediate assistance. National data from the 2021-22 period reveals that 31.5% of all clients (85,915 people) sought help to sustain a tenancy or avoid eviction. Shockingly, 15.7% of these clients (13,528 people) couldn't receive the support they needed, and an additional 71,962 couldn't be assisted. Some cases may have gone unreported due to communication barriers, like an inability to reach a service worker. This underscores the urgency of the situation.

The 2021 Census recorded more than 1,000 people experiencing homelessness across the major centres of Shepparton, Wodonga, and Wangaratta, with hundreds more living in “marginal housing” like caravan parks or in overcrowded or impoverished dwellings. The figures are more than just statistics – they are a distressing wake-up call. With a significant portion of our community without a home and many more teetering on the brink of unstable or inadequate housing, the need for action has never been more urgent. We require more than just temporary fixes; we need a holistic solution that provides immediate relief but also effectively addresses the fundamental causes.

Failing to intervene during a crisis only intensifies the demand for services, as individuals who lose their homes will require even greater support to find new housing. The ripple effect harms the individuals affected and the more extensive system struggling to manage this crisis.

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The work in crisis prevention is far from simple; it is time-intensive and necessitates specialised skills. Beyond Housing staff may need to help clients navigate the intricacies of Centrelink entitlements, settle neighbourhood disputes or landlord conflicts, and resolve legal or family matters. Moreover, during the tense period leading up to a potential eviction, other crises—mental health breakdowns, financial emergencies, and safety concerns—also demand immediate attention.

Call to Action

In this submission, Beyond Housing aims to underscore the crucial role of homelessness services in averting immediate crises. We advocate for allocating more resources and specialised training to do this work effectively.

If you have lived experience of homelessness, understanding what could have made a difference in the 4-6 weeks before losing your home can provide invaluable insights for improving crisis prevention efforts. The first-hand accounts can help us tailor our services to meet the most pressing needs of those at imminent risk of homelessness.

We must invest heavily in crisis prevention to transform our approach from managing homelessness to eradicating it. Immediate, specialised interventions are critical in this phase, and Beyond Housing is committed to leading the way. We call upon all stakeholders to recognise the situation's urgency and contribute to enhancing the resources and skills needed to make this work as effective as possible.

Prevention is pivotal, but for those who do find themselves homeless, Beyond Housing is committed to making their experience brief and non-recurring. This means working to alleviate the immediate crisis, outlining a roadmap out of homelessness, and providing ongoing support to sustain housing.

Capacity constraints

Homelessness services like Beyond Housing are primarily geared towards aiding those who have already lost their homes.

However, the demand for these services often outstrips available resources, and the burgeoning housing crisis exacerbates the situation. Support and housing are rationed, leaving a large segment of the homeless population without the critical help they need.

According to AIHW data for 2020-21, providing essential housing and accommodation remains a significant challenge. We at Beyond Housing have also observed these capacity shortfalls in staffing, brokerage, and housing availability.

As at June 2023, there were more than 5000 people on the Victorian Housing Register priority waiting across the Goulburn and Ovens Murray regions.

Impact of capacity shortfalls

Strains on homelessness services often spill over into other human services systems, such as healthcare and child protection. This manifests as longer waiting times, increased use of demand management strategies, and costs being shifted to other sectors like acute health, mental health, child protection, and judicial services.

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The ramifications are especially harrowing for the clients we serve. For example:

- Women and children returning to violent homes due to lack of available support or safe accommodation.
- Exacerbation of mental health issues due to housing instability.
- Children experiencing extended periods in crisis accommodation or sleeping in cars trigger child protection involvement.
- Entrenchment in repeated cycles of homelessness.
- Reliance on risky alternatives like rough sleeping, couch surfing, or residing in rooming houses with inherent risks of violence.

Evidence to support these claims comes from academic research, internal assessments, and direct quotes from service users and workers who've experienced or observed these outcomes firsthand.

Time to act

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive, multi-pronged approach. Beyond Housing calls for an influx of resources to increase staff, expand brokerage services, and secure more housing and accommodations. We also advocate for data-driven strategies and policies that make experiences of homelessness as brief and non-recurring as possible.

By amplifying the collective voice of those we serve and those who serve within our organisation, Beyond Housing aims not just to manage homelessness but to contribute to its eradication meaningfully. We invite all stakeholders to partake in this urgent mission to improve our community's well-being.

Solutions for rapid exits from homelessness

A critical component of effective homelessness prevention and intervention is personalisation. The journey out of homelessness varies significantly depending on individual circumstances. For instance, a 15-year-old escaping domestic violence has different needs than a person over 55 facing rental affordability issues.

While families require a different type of support than singles, even among singles, the requirements can differ based on the complexity of their issues. Therefore, services must adapt to these diverse needs rather than applying a 'one size fits all' model.

One effective solution is adopting housing-led approaches, which minimise the time spent in crisis and transitional housing by prioritising immediate access to permanent housing. The traditional 'staircase' model, involving crisis accommodation, transitional housing, and finally long-term housing, is fraught with bottlenecks intensified by the housing crisis. This often leads to a damaging cycle where individuals are stuck in emergency or transitional housing for extended periods, resulting in escalated mental health issues and entrenched homelessness.

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Housing-led approaches aim to break this cycle by immediately moving people into stable housing and addressing the issues that may have contributed to their homelessness.

Housing First

Housing First is a particularly compelling model for those with complex needs. It focuses on placing people in permanent housing without any precondition of 'housing readiness,' offering an array of targeted support services afterwards. The support services, whether dealing with addiction, mental health, or employment issues, are intensive and coordinated. The separation of housing provision from support services ensures that individuals don't lose their housing if they opt not to use the services, aligning with the principle that housing is a human right. Critical elements for success include:

- **Adequate and affordable housing stock:** At the core of any successful housing-led approach is sufficient availability of affordable and suitable housing.
- **Multi-disciplinary support:** For individuals with complex needs, a multidisciplinary team comprising social workers, healthcare providers, and employment counsellors is essential.
- **Flexible funding:** Resources must be available to cover various needs, from rental assistance to mental health services.
- **Policy support:** Government policies must align with and support housing-led and Housing First initiatives.
- **Community partnerships:** Collaboration with other organisations can extend the reach and effectiveness of services.

Ending homelessness relies on much more significant investment in housing-led approaches, which means much greater investment in social and affordable housing and the support needed for people to gain and sustain housing rapidly.

The model

Recognised as the most effective approach for people with high support needs, the Housing First model aims to move people into stable housing swiftly. Unlike traditional models, it eliminates the need for individuals to prove that they are 'housing ready.'

Once individuals are housed, intensive and coordinated support is provided for additional needs like substance abuse, mental health, and other challenges. Housing First operates on the fundamental principle that housing is a human right, not a privilege conditional on sobriety or employment.

While Housing First is exceptionally effective for those with complex needs, it may not be necessary for all individuals experiencing homelessness. It is crucial to recognise that not everyone requires this model's level of intensive support. Thus, it should be one of multiple approaches within a housing-led strategy that addresses the varying needs of the homeless population.

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Trauma-Informed responses

Trauma is a critical factor that both contributes to homelessness and is exacerbated by the experience of being homeless. The vulnerability and uncertainty associated with homelessness can further traumatise individuals, complicating their path to recovery and stability.

To address this, services must be "trauma-informed," considering the psychological, emotional, and physical well-being of the individuals they serve. The critical elements of a trauma-informed approach include:

- **Compassionate and Empathetic Services:** Services should be designed to focus on the individual's needs and choices, ensuring that their dignity and agency are preserved.
- **Safe Environments:** Physical and emotional safety is critical. Facilities should be designed and operated to minimise stress and risk of re-traumatization.
- **Staff Training:** Staff should receive training on trauma's prevalence, impact, and symptoms to respond effectively to the needs of those they serve.
- **Inclusive Design:** Incorporate knowledge about trauma into all aspects of service design and delivery, from initial intake to ongoing support.
- **Involvement of Lived Experience:** People who have lived experience with homelessness and trauma should be involved in the decision-making processes, ensuring that services are effective and sensitive to the needs of those they serve.

Housing First for those with complex needs and trauma-informed care across all services can significantly improve the efficacy of homelessness intervention strategies. This dual focus ensures that we not only rapidly rehouse individuals but also do so in a manner that is cognisant of and sensitive to their holistic needs.

Meeting the Needs of Different Groups Experiencing Homelessness

Responding to People Sleeping Rough

The Problem: Despite making up just 6% of the homeless population, rough sleepers are among the most visible and politically charged groups. The visibility often leads to ineffective "quick fixes" rather than systemic solutions.

What Works: Strategies that are housing-led, offer personalised support, and are carried out swiftly have been proven effective. In Australia, local initiatives that coupled service coordination with Housing First have seen notable success in reducing rough sleeping.

Recommendation: While inter-agency collaboration is valuable, it should not be overstated as a panacea. Housing First models, backed by sufficient funding, are essential for tackling the issue.

Responding to Unaccompanied Children and Young People

The Problem: These vulnerable children and youths lack housing and adult care, making them susceptible to exploitation and neglect.

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Unique Needs: Such children often face barriers to education and healthcare and may not even know where to seek help.

What Works: Targeted interventions and supports that consider the child's developmental stage and immediate needs are needed. Services must also coordinate with educational, health, and child protection systems.

Recommendation: A national child and youth homelessness plan is necessary to offer specialised support and prevent children from entering homelessness in the first place.

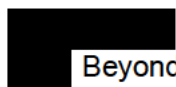
Other Groups with Specific Needs

- Women and Children Victims of Violence Require secure, immediate housing options and specialised support services.
- First Nations Australians: Cultural sensitivity and consultation are vital in providing appropriate and effective services.
- LGBTIQ+ Individuals: Discrimination and family estrangement are common challenges requiring specialised support.
- Older People Often face unique health and financial challenges that make homelessness particularly risky.
- People with Serious Mental Illness Require stable housing and medical and psychological support services.

General Recommendations

- **Tailored Interventions:** One-size-fits-all approaches are ineffective. Service providers must be equipped to offer specialised support.
- **Inter-Agency Collaboration:** While it can improve service efficiency, collaboration is most effective when paired with evidence-based interventions like Housing First.
- **Prevention:** Identifying at-risk individuals before becoming homeless, especially among children and youth, can save resources and lives.
- **National Plans:** Separate but integrated national plans may be needed for different demographics to address each group's unique challenges.
- **Inclusion of Lived Experience:** Involving people who have lived through homelessness in planning and decision-making can offer invaluable insights into practical solutions.

Adopting these recommendations and focusing on the unique needs of various groups can create a more humane and effective response to homelessness.



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