



National Housing and Homelessness Plan
Department of Social Services
GPO Box 9820
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By email: Housingandhomelessnessplan@dss.gov.au

20 October 2023

Submission to the National Housing and Homelessness Plan

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the development of the National Housing and Homelessness Plan (the Plan).

Uniting NSW.ACT contributes to the work of the Uniting Church in NSW and the ACT, through social justice advocacy, community services and spiritual care. We provide services for all people through all ages and stages of life, and drive solutions to systemic issues so people experiencing disadvantage can live their best lives. Our purpose is to inspire people, enliven communities and confront injustice. We value diversity and always welcome everyone exactly as they are.

In this submission, we focus primarily on matters relating to homelessness services and crisis/transitional housing. In so doing, we are drawing on our experience as a significant provider of these services in NSW and the ACT, with approximately 4,400 clients each year. Of these clients:

- 10% identify as culturally and linguistically diverse;
- 3% identify as LGBTIQ;
- 34% are First Nations peoples;
- 72% are under 26 years;
- 80% are unemployed upon program entry; and
- 56% have a mental health diagnosis.

We are also a provider of low-cost housing to older people, primarily through our retirement living villages. This includes both housing provided through specialist programs including the NSW Government-funded Social and Affordable Housing Fund, and residential aged care services which specialise in caring for older people with lived experience of homelessness. As such, we have experience of other issues raised by the Issues Paper, such as the impact of land zoning and investment costs on housing supply. On these issues, we endorse the submission made by the Faith Housing Alliance.

We commend the collaborative approach in the Plan. We agree with the Issues Paper's renewed call to identify gaps and set policy objectives in consideration of all state and territory programs and strategies.

We attach a submission responding to the issues paper in detail. Our principal

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recommendations are:

- Increase funding for Reconnect services to take on more young people and increase the likelihood of positive improvements in terms of housing, financial resilience and employment;
- Co-locate government (housing) staff with service provider sites to encourage interagency collaboration in tailoring a combined approach to delivering housing and support services/reduce siloed approaches to service coordination and leverage local knowledge and expertise;
- Extend the length of support that services can provide to people to facilitate a tapering-off of services towards greater independence, and more trauma-sensitive and proactive outreach programs;
- Continue to fund head tenancy housing programs like the Premier's Youth Initiative to ensure young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness have safe and secure housing while they develop life skills and work towards achieving their education, employment and other personal goals, and scale up and scale out positive models of capacity building within the community;
- Invest in professional development and training, to build and retain a skilled workforce (this should include specialised training to improve understanding of the biological, social, psychological and emotional domains of adolescent development);
- Provide care leavers with a range of housing and wraparound supports (including financial literacy programs) such as through Youth Foyers, particularly in regional areas, and increase income support to improve their ability to afford rent.
- Fund and support larger organisations to work with local Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations on an ongoing, long-term basis to understand housing needs of the local community. Increased funding and greater support for organisational or sector-wide collaborations can also amplify the voices of ACCOs and smaller local organisations, who may be less-resourced than larger organisations.

We would be very pleased to provide more information. Please contact [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely,

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Submission to the Issues Paper for the National Housing and Homelessness Plan

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the National Housing and Homelessness Plan, as a service provider organization with advocacy and policy analysis functions. In addition to our responses to each discussion question listed within the Issues Paper, we have provided recommendations.

We note that approximately 122,500 people experience homelessness in Australia on any given night, and 39% of young people will experience homelessness in the first year after leaving State care, and 54% within four years. Most homelessness is hidden, with people in insecure housing, overcrowded dwellings, couch surfing or crisis accommodation. The underlying causes of homelessness are complex and multi-faceted, and not restricted just to rooflessness. There are a range of social, economic and health determinants of homelessness, which include individual factors such as: experience of domestic and family violence, all forms of trauma and abuse, poor physical and mental health, lack of adequate income, low educational achievement and limited access to affordable and available housing.

Uniting's housing and homelessness portfolio

Data collected by our specialist homelessness services as part of their operations reflects the same priority homelessness cohorts identified in the Issues Paper: women and children affected by family and domestic violence, children and young people, First Nations peoples, people experiencing repeat homelessness, people exiting from care into homelessness, older people, LGBTQI youth, and people born overseas. Our program data shows that the major forms of disadvantage experienced by our clients are relationship and family breakdown, and leaving out-of-home care. Additionally, 62% of our clients are under 26 years old and our service delivery approach reflects this younger cohort.

Our services operate across NSW and the ACT. The majority of our homelessness services are in Western and South-West Sydney, which include both contracted support (Rent Choice Youth, Together Home), to specialist homelessness services (Doorways Youth, Doorways for Men, Youth2Home Crisis Accommodation and Case Management, Women2Home, Men2Home, Stepping Stone/Homelessness Youth Assistance Program), and early intervention programs (Reconnect). We also have a significant presence in the Mid-North Coast (Premier's Youth Initiative), and are a provider of low-cost housing for older people through our retirement villages and low-cost rental accommodation for older people across both jurisdictions. Some of these are funded specifically to work with older people with a history of homelessness, under the NSW Government's Social and Affordable Housing fund. Finally, while not primarily a housing or homelessness service, we are also one of the largest providers of residential aged care, and one of our facilities in metropolitan Sydney specialises in working with people with a history of homelessness.

Our underlying approach in our homelessness services, "Housing First", provides wraparound supports alongside safe and stable accommodation. The following principles broadly inform and guide our current housing and homelessness ecosystem:

- People have a right to a home;
- Housing and support are distinctly provided, but in a concerted way;
- Flexible support for as long as is needed;
- Choice and self-determination;
- Active engagement free from coercion;
- Social and community inclusion;
- Recovery-oriented; and
- Harm reduction approach.

What's working now?

The recent evaluation of family and relationship services funded by the Australian Government (conducted by Family and Relationship Services Australia) found that the Reconnect program provides \$5.40 of benefit for every \$1 of funding. Key impacts of this early intervention service included improvements in family functioning, significant improvements in mental health, wellbeing and self-care, and improvements in personal and family safety. Most notably, Reconnect was associated with the largest change across these domains.¹

Uniting clients who have exited the Reconnect program in the last 2 years reported improvements across all domains, most notably a 66% increase in terms of being safe, relationships, and feelings and behaviour. Our latest data also reveal that almost three quarters of clients stated having their goals achieved as the reason for program exit.

- **Recommendation:** Increase funding for Reconnect services to take on more young people and increase the likelihood of positive improvements in terms of housing, financial resilience and employment

Current problems and how governments and community organisations can work together

Several barriers to more effective and efficient collaboration between governments and community organisations exist. This section outlines some of the barriers and issues that staff have identified along with any strategies or solutions currently in use, and the relevant recommendations.

Inadequate information sharing between services is causing avoidable delays in young people accessing supports. Our services have told us of cases where young people were referred to us, and where the referring agency did not provide us all the information we need to effectively support them. This led to delays in our working with them as we conducted our own assessments to gather information the system already held, or followed up with the referrer to obtain it. We support a coordinated triage process that follows clients from one service to another, and enables supportive and connective work during the process of referral, as well as to ensure that all case notes are transferred accurately to prevent clients from needing to re-tell their stories.

- **Recommendation:** Co-locate government (housing) staff with service providers' sites to encourage interagency collaboration in tailoring a combined approach to delivering housing and support services/reduce siloed approaches to service coordination and leverage local knowledge and expertise.

People experiencing homelessness are likely to experience repeated homelessness. To avoid this, a wide range of wraparound supports are required over an extended period of time. We find that significant time and energy need to be invested in helping clients with complex vulnerabilities and challenges feel safe, co-develop safety plans, and provide mental health and alcohol and other drug use supports, conflict resolution skills, and other daily living skills. Service providers need flexible, longer periods of time to work with people experiencing homelessness, and work alongside them to identify needs and work towards achieving short- and long-term goals.

- **Recommendation:** Extend the length of support that services can provide to people to facilitate a tapering-off of services towards greater independence, and more trauma-sensitive and proactive outreach programs.

¹ Family and Relationship Services Economic Evaluation. (2023). *The Centre for International Economics*. Canberra, ACT. <https://frsa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CIE-Final-Report-FRSA-Family-and-Relationship-Services-Evaluation-11092023.pdf>

There could also be a reluctance to seek help because of a history of being disappointed by the service system. Our staff frequently particularly need to rebuild the trust of their young clients in the system (including government and non-government agencies), because previous contact had been negative and unhelpful. Staff cited needing to “repair clients’ previous interactions with the system that have been so dysfunctional”, and reassuring clients that they “are not in trouble, we want to help you and work with you to fix this relationship”.

Staff work with clients to understand their needs that will allow them to engage with housing services in ways that feel comfortable and appropriate to them, due to apprehension and distrust of services who have not been able and willing to support them in the past. In our Premier’s Youth Initiative program, staff and clients cited the benefits of having a tenancy manager within the program who could advocate to prospective real estate agents and property owners on behalf of young clients, build the capacity of these agents and owners to consider, accept and subsequently seek out new tenants through Uniting because of positive experiences, as well as model and facilitate positive social relationship building between these young tenants and their neighbours. Combining safe and secure housing with ongoing tailored support has also been shown to improve wellbeing and deliver sustainable solutions to end homelessness.²

- **Recommendation:** Continue to fund head tenancy housing programs like the Premier’s Youth Initiative to ensure young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness have safe and secure housing while they develop life skills and work towards achieving their education, employment and other personal goals, and scale up and scale out positive models of capacity building within the community.

Our programs teams have also called for more training and support for workers to participate in professional development to build their confidence and competence in working with young/young adult clients, who have different developmental needs and/or are at different developmental stages due to complex vulnerabilities or challenges they are facing. Staff have also cited that they work with some clients who come in with significant health concerns and risks, including suicidal ideation and/or recent attempts, and this duty of care sometimes required escalation and/or backup from colleagues.

- **Recommendation:** Invest in professional development and training, to build and retain a skilled workforce (this should include specialised training to improve understanding of the biological, social, psychological and emotional domains of adolescent development).

Young people leaving out-of-home care are particularly vulnerable to homelessness after leaving State care³. Care leavers are overrepresented in homelessness services, and a range of housing options should be available to suit individual needs. Of the total number of young people leaving State care, 16% accessed homelessness services in the previous year and 91% were likely to access homelessness services in the next year. Financial hardship, negative mental health, and substance use were also identified as contributing factors to homelessness for this cohort. A sense of security, social support and stability are linked to better long-term outcomes after leaving State care, and young people need to be supported while they adjust to independent living⁴. The Foyer Central program redresses the siloed nature of housing and homelessness services, by shaping and coordinating delivery of housing, wraparound supports and life skills coaching to help young care leavers achieve positive personal, educational and

² O’ Sullivan, E. (2022). Key elements in homelessness strategies to end homelessness by 2030: A discussion paper. https://housingfirsteurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/mlc-homelessness-discussion-paper_final_2022.pdf

³ NSW Family and Community Services Insights, Analysis and Research. (2023). Pathways to homelessness for young people leaving out-of-home care in NSW.

⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2023). Income support receipt for young people transitioning from out-of-home care.

employment outcomes.

- **Recommendation:** Provide care leavers with a range of housing and wraparound supports (including financial literacy programs) such as through Youth Foyers, particularly in regional areas, and increase income support to improve their ability to afford rent.

How could governments work with different services and organisations to support housing for First Nations people?

Our experience working with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) in Northern NSW has been crucial in helping us to identify and address homelessness in regional and remote areas. A key component of these partnerships has been to work with smaller local organisations and ACCOs to understand support needs for First Nations Peoples around housing options. Larger organisations such as Uniting can offer infrastructural support and capacity to deliver services reliably, and work with ACCOs to identify the supports required to increase competitiveness for tenders. ACCOs are a crucial vehicle for First Nations self-determination, and have local knowledge, expertise and connections with the community to facilitate genuine engagement and rapport building. And conversely, ACCO partners have a crucial role to play in delivering services in more culturally appropriate ways, and supporting larger organisations to identify training needs and to establish and/or support identified roles within their teams.

- **Recommendation:** Fund and support larger organisations to work with local Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations on an ongoing, long-term basis to understand housing needs of the local community. Increased funding and greater support for organisational or sector-wide collaborations can also amplify the voices of ACCOs and smaller local organisations, who may be less-resourced than larger organisations.

Looking to the future

We commend the Australian Government on its work to date in calling for all State and Territory governments and non-government service providers, advocacy and peak organisations to make submissions and strengthen the National Housing and Homelessness Plan. We believe that the Plan will be an important mechanism in guiding ongoing discussions and the implementation of state- and territory-wide levers of change. Community and services should also be involved in operationalizing the Housing Accord. We are critical to meeting the requirements of the Housing Accord (1 billion new homes) in ways that successfully manage the risks for vulnerable families and communities. Without appropriate services, transport and community infrastructure, social housing can place people at further disadvantage.